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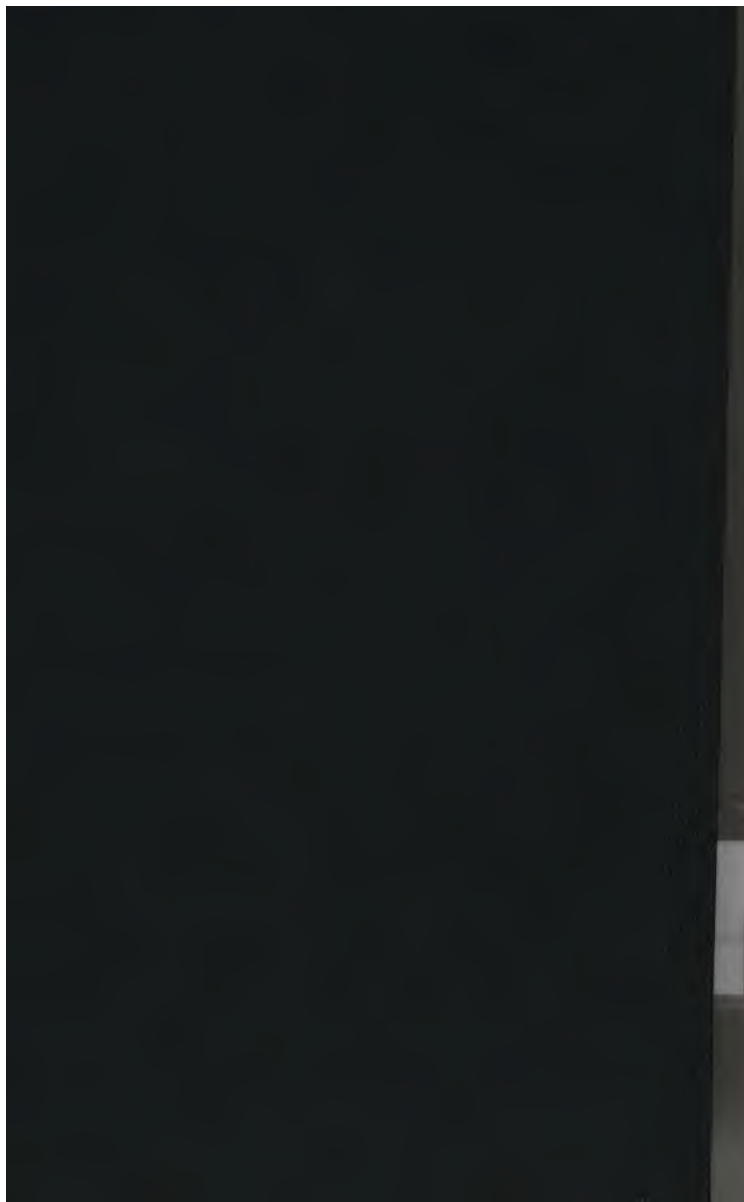
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ANON
HINCHBRIDGE HAUNTED:

A Country Story.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"THE GREEN HAND," "THE TWO FRIGATES," ETC.

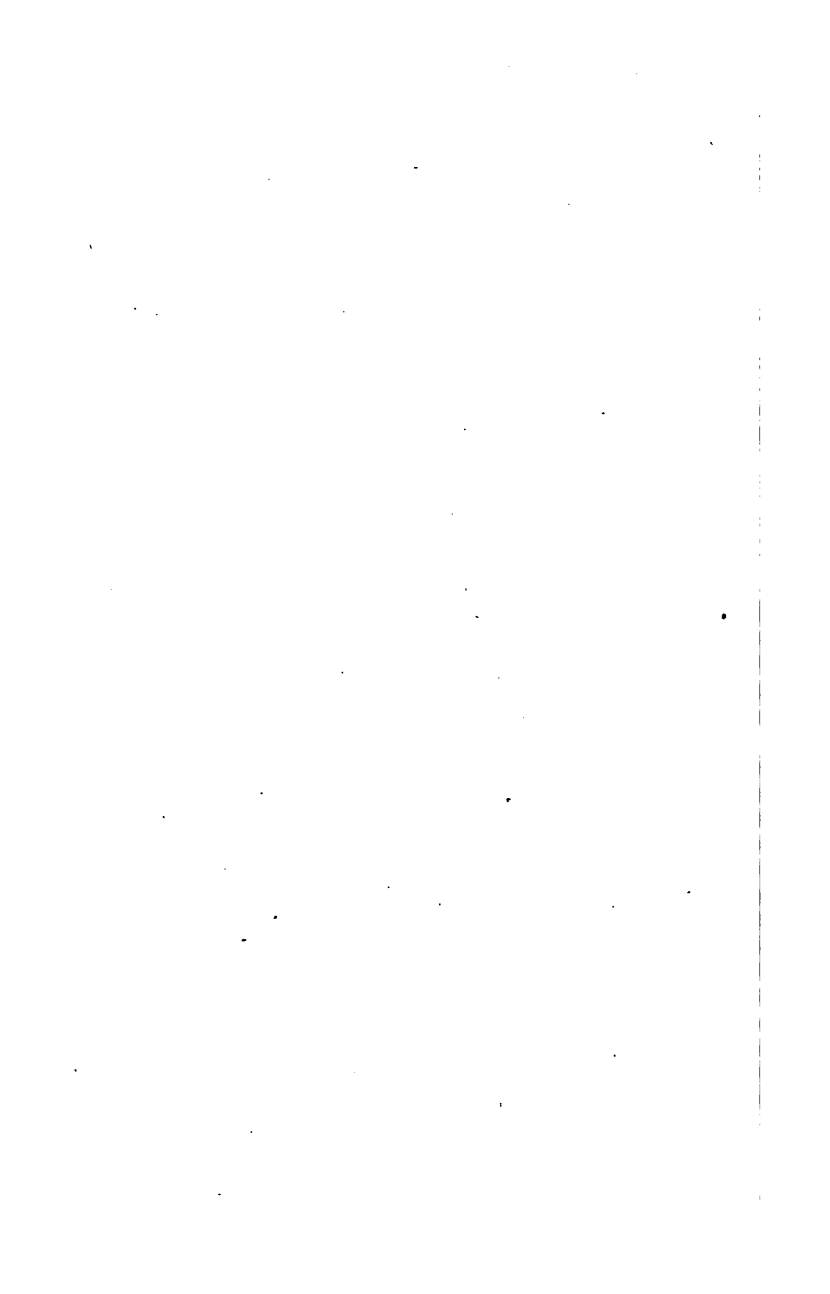


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HINCHBRIDGE HAUNTED:

A Country Story.

CHAPTER I.

TRIUMPH TO THE "BLUE PIG."—AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

THE passing of the stage-coach through a small country village, in the old days of coaching, when George the Third was king, used to be a great matter indeed ; especially if, as at Hinchbridge in Sussex, it was the only regular link with the great world.

On one special afternoon of a fine spring day, the village looked forward to this event with an increased excitement ; which feeling was of course shared by the tavern with the sign of the "Blue Pig," at the corner nearest the coach-road from London. The "Mercury" did not change horses there, and seldom had occasion even to pause till it reached the opposite end of Hinchbridge. For a few moments, indeed, Joseph Muggops, landlord of the "Blue Pig," looked out of his door-way for the coach, in his apron and shirt-sleeves, with his hat on, as was usual with him ; but, plainly, he expected nothing in particular from the occurrence. He was busy enough within, all things considered ; seeing that his entire establishment, composed of his daughter and the kitchen-wench, had left the charge for his broad

shoulders, as if to bring down by way of exercise some undue gain of flesh which no bruising friend could have approved. He had originally been a member of what is called "the Ring," from which circumstances had led to his retiring here; yet, as often happens with professors of the manly art, he was of an easy temper. His countenance expressed this, with the sole exception of one marked protuberance on the bridge of a rather flattened nose, and a somewhat gloomy shade upon his mood for the time.

Political matters, for sundry reasons, were delicate for Muggops to meddle with, if he wanted his lease renewed; and political business was the cause, that evening, why Hinchbridge took such redoubled interest in the London stage. People were about, therefore, whose attention he did not care to attract; especially that of Sloane, the Hall bailiff, who had just ridden past. Not that Muggops was in himself political; having no theory whatever on any matter, save that the Squire was a friend of Sir Thomas Deane at the Hall, and that the "Deane Arms" at the further end of Hinchbridge, where the coach changed horses, must be let reap the entire advantage without show of grudge on his part: he had ticklish enough matter already to face up against, when next quarter-sessions should bring his licence under consideration, and next Lady-day should follow up about the lease. Everyone about Hinchbridge was not exactly to be counted among his friends; however much he had felt it his interest to keep an orderly house, to hold clear of old connections, and know nothing of Dick Cox's suspected poaching, of Hubbard the cobbler's levelling opinions, or of old Dockett, the parish clerk's prejudices, with the constable's liking for a drop of something stronger than the best ale; by means of which latter, added to a snug chimney-settle, and a skittle-ground at the back premises, Muggops acquired a social character for the "Blue Pig," endeavouring in the very name of it to avoid sides, and combine local

Toryism with fair play to British liberty in individuals. As for his daughter, her management was not only the making of him, but he was proud of her looks, which had contrived to retain the hot-tempered Hall game-keeper, while they held a certain recruiting-corporal in steadier bonds. Emma Muggops did not cheapen these charms by any means, though she had now run out of her little bar-place as soon as the first sound was heard from the coach-horn; attired in the most fashionable, if not the genteelest gown in the village, such as her close friend, the dressmaker, was glad to copy, for its taste.

As the hollow rumble over the bridge was followed again by a louder rattle, and a more flourishing blast of caution to all concerned, Miss Muggops shaded her eyes from the evening sun, which, nevertheless, must have augmented her own attractions to the crowd of passengers borne—past next minute, with a superordinary nod of recognition from the driving-box, and even some momentary notice from a stout elderly person beside it, who did not look the likeliest of admirers. For the rest—a confused medley of noisy figures above and of peering faces below—they went by with a jingling clatter into the vista of Hinchbridge; the magnet for every door and window, every barking cur and chasing school-boy, to the corner round the green, where the Deane Arms faced the park wall on the Chichester-road. That inn itself was hidden by woods from view of the “Blue Pig,” which had been passed unregarded; only the dust was visible, that tended thither, and the little mob of boys and children rushing after.

“All full, in course, Hemmar?” disdainfully growled Muggops from the inner passage, as he descended his stair from a fresh call of the graziers. “Wot was the colours mostly, now, did ye chance to see—buff or blue? Never mind, though—wot’s the odds to the ‘Pig?’ Not so much as a parcel, this time! Well, the ‘Harms’ won’t do much good by it, anyhow—’lectioneerers don’t

stop at 'Inchbridge—wot's 'Inchbridge got to do with it' either? Here, you Sukey, now you've had your share of it, I s'pose you'll take up this 'ere ale?"

"Taint exactly *our* election, of course, father," observed Emma, "but it's odd for the Hall member to be gone against, in Chelmstone. The first time, the Corporal says, since it was a borough,—and as for the 'Keeper, he was there just now looking out for the coach, with Bailiff Sloane, as if his place depended on it! I don't think Colonel Deane was inside—and I'm sure he wasn't out."

"S'help me, ye don't act'llly say so!" ejaculated her father, with an emphatic slap of one broad palm upon a lusty thigh. "They made cock-sure of the Colonel to-night for them hustings at Chelmst'n to-morrow—fust time as ever hustings wos, I expect, hereabouts. Well, I'm rabbitted if it don't put 'em out in their reckonin's a bit!" And Muggops indulged a gradual chuckle that promised to become rather too obviously convulsive at his outer door, had not filial prudence checked it.

"Come, now, father," said Emma, using a little gentle compulsion as she drew him aside to her own bar-closet, "you take care—do. What's our business with it?—here's constable with his coat on, setting off from work to see what's wrong,—it's some disturbance about the "'Arms'—coming this way, too."

They looked together through the latticed bow-window, among the tidy show of pewter-pots and other symbols of hospitality, where the landlord could still further flatten his nose against the glass without risk, between a coloured cordial-bottle and a tempting piece of cold boiled bacon, pleasantly illuminated from the western sun. "To be sure, gal," said he, philosophically resigned, "politics an't got to do with the 'Pig,'—no, nor sides. No sides when you henters this 'ere roof, say I—and I'll say it as long as it's over me, them's the rules to be stuck by. Wot ever *is* the row, though? Wish it was the 'Arms'

afire,—they can't be anything like full—but here's baggage a-comin' our way, anyhow!"

"Yes, and a passenger behind it, too," said Miss Muggops, more calmly. "It's the old gentleman that had the box-seat—if he *was* a gentleman, that's to say. Well, suppose he did want a room by any chance, we ain't got it this moment,—and if it was even possibly a bed, you know, father, there's not a decent corner from top to bottom, only except——"

Her father caught at the expression of Emma's eye with irrepressible anxiety. "Hemmar, Hemmar!" exclaimed he huskily, "it's a portmanteau and no mistake; an wot's more, there's a man in livery got charge on it, bound here! A gen'leman, by 'sticks! Couldn't ye just put 'em up, if it *was*? Wot's a night?—come—here goes!"

He was caught by the apron before his rush of welcome took effect. A shouting rabble of children, scampering beforehand to the front-wicket of the tavern, sufficiently indicated the fact in question, that so extraordinary a visit to the "Blue Pig" was intended; but Emma Muggops was firm as to the answer being left in her hands. Her own neat little attic, papered and tended by herself, looking out behind over the garden, she *would* give up for that grand occasion; though nothing but management, of course, could catch the chance, or opportunely convey away those independent graziers above, from the only parlour. So the excited emotions of Muggops himself were suppressed within, while she passed out composedly to meet the case, aided by Sukey alone.

"Ah—oh—well?" hastily demanded the man-servant outside, backed by a village lad with the portmanteau, "*you're* not full, too, are ye, missus? Not got a spare room, either, eh?—not so much as a closet, owing to 'lection times, like t'other place?"

Miss Muggops, with self-possession that did credit to her, returned a placid reply. It delighted the paternal

heart, close at hand, to feel how unflattered was her admission of rooms left; still more, that she decidedly repudiated political connection, or imitation of the "Deane Arms" in any way. Not that she herself felt much disposed to like the man's appearance, which at first sight was still less prepossessing than the sound of his voice, or the prospect of his master with a very red face and an attitude of indignation, stamping a great yellow walking-cane before him as he came on alone, behind the train of helpers, but watched slyly from every door and window in his rear.

"Ho! oh! so much the better!" croaked the odd voice of the queer-looking attendant, who had surveyed the sign above the door rather contemptuously, almost grinning in her face. "Ho! he! he'll find it to his taste, I daresay. Stir your legs, here, young stoopid with that luggage, and then be off with your whole ragamuffin crew—he's paid, mind ye, missis. I'll look after the guv'nor." He set off again towards the old gentleman, cleared the way with a vicious jerk and tug that sent the children flying, and after a little evident difficulty, succeeded in bringing the important guest fairly inside, scarcely soothed as yet from some excitement to a manifestly-choleric temper. There he took breath, turned defiantly to the village street, and, taking out a large yellow silk handkerchief that suggested oriental richness, blew his nose like a trumpet, looking as grand as a Nabob himself. Nabobs were then rising into repute, while Bristol sugar-bakers declined in notoriety; and Muggops from the window in the bar-door marked the bilious temperament and nankeen vest, the heavy gold watch-seals and the cambric ruffles, with a knowing eye which found no detraction from its bright idea, although the limbs encased in buff nether garments and light-coloured silk stockings had a native sturdiness about them, and a quakerish plainness distinguished the snuff-brown coat.

"An insufferable place!" muttered the elderly pas-

senger, wiping his forehead and puffing. "What time does your extraordinary stage-coach pass again?" he called out with a voice that filled the passage, sending Sukey dismayed into the recesses of the kitchen, where her mistress had but just contrived to allure the graziers down. Muggops himself emerged gradually, without his hat, invested in a coat, smoothing down his hair.

"Beg parding, sir. W'ich way?" said he with uncommon deference.

"Any way—back to town or on to—some civilized place," was the ungracious answer. "Not much matter where, I daresay."

The "Mercury" went back next morning, he was informed, and next evening would return again for Chichester. Always passing that very door, the landlord anxiously assured him. As for putting up a gen'lman and servant, Muggops hoped, plain as the rooms might be thought, they were heartily at his service. What was more, they went by the name of being pleasant to look out of, as couldn't be said of some others, at t'other end, which offered on a stable-yard.

The stout elderly gentleman smoothed down fast: he ordered up his portmanteau, and was not indisposed to converse in a passing way about the place and neighbourhood; for convenience of traversing which, or going on, if needful, to Chelmstone next day, he found that a spring-cart was always handy close by, besides a gig that could at times be got. Confirmed by Muggops in the belief that the "Deane Arms" could not really have been full, though election times had been pleaded there, he concentrated his resentment on that servile establishment of the Hall interest alone; and, finally, was ushered upstairs in the most elaborate style his host could muster, to a sitting-room which, though small, justified the boast on its behalf. A couple of old newspapers, rather sporting in their tendency, with a last year's almanac, were less hopeful entertainment, till supper should appear, than an open window looking over a bank of village

gardens, down through spring trees to the level, where the stream wound past some better houses into the woods of an old mansion adjacent. Yet neither of them did the elder gentleman seem to require, for he could be heard to walk backwards and forwards overhead, now stopping a little, now quickening his pace, finally sending for an ink-bottle and sitting down to write, till he summoned his man to take a letter to the post.

This same man was as yet the least satisfactory part of the affair to Emma Muggops in her bar-closet, whence she noticed all comers and goers, superintending matters in a way somewhat detached from her father's homelier kitchen business, and enabled to receive a friend, if need be, to a quiet dish of genteel tea. Miss Gibbs, the dressmaker, had thus stepped over that evening, not intending to stay, but eager for news, and of course accompanied by her work. Fashion on that occasion yielded to Chelmsstone election, and Miss Gibbs herself had already heard, although remote from public life, in fact more generally interested by the private sorrows of any heroine in a romance,—that Colonel Deane, having trusted to the "Mercury" stage-coach to bring him down that afternoon for next day's nomination at the neighbouring borough, had been cheated out of his seat—that was to say, a seat in the coach—by the unexpected cunning of the Buffs. It was well known that the Buffs, all at once so active about Chelmsstone borough, set great store by it all of a sudden; and they had cleverly secured half the coach beforehand, so that the very messenger with the writ from Government, which was said to be absolutely necessary to the business to-morrow, could hardly get a place. Not for love or money could the Colonel find room, even among the luggage on the top, for his very servant; but he had sent some message, which drove Bailiff Sloane, and the gamekeeper, and all Sir Thomas's people, into a perfect distraction. Then there was some passenger in the coach, or upon it, who had taken the main part in keeping out the Colonel, and

refused to give up a place, though he had two engaged ; and he was suspected, indeed there was no doubt of it, to be no other than a Mr. Smith, chief friend to the Honourable Mr. Frere, Lord Highwood's brother, whom the great folks on the other side had just brought forward to contest the town. For the town was thrown open again, it seemed, by the Colonel's getting a high government office.

Such was the drift of Miss Gibbs's confused account, which Miss Muggops might scarcely be able to render quite lucid ; but they both pretty well understood why the Hall people were so anxious. Colonel Deane Williams had not estates like his relative Sir Thomas Deane, and somehow he would lose this fine opportunity from his Majesty's favour, if Chelmstone, by any ill luck, thought fit to vent a spite at him now. He was actually called *shabby* in Chelmstone, was the Colonel !

If this stout elderly person, denied quarters at the Inn, were by any possibility the Mr. Smith in question, with his law-agent in disguise, what a victim had been made of the "Blue Pig !" That odd little fellow a groom, forsooth ? His clothes did not suit him—they hung about him—they were, beyond controversy, *new* ! So did Miss Gibbs's professional eye enable her to declare ; and that they were not exactly a livery ; they looked a sort of sober, genteelish make-up for the time, allowing for a respectable person's feelings. There was a worse peculiarity about them—not openly alluded to by Emma ; he wore a waistcoat with yellow stripes, his breeches were leather of a tinge not to be mistaken, though the gaiters might be called drab, and the neckerchief a spotted fawn. As the inference dawned on her, it led step by step more distinctly up the stair with him to his pretended master, when the latter had called from above. Why had they both been refused lodging at the "Arms"—*why*, but because buff colours were so plainly shown by them, they declared themselves silly to be buff, and buff they should have been detected for, by the simplest mind.

O poor father Muggops—O stupid daughter Emma, for all her management ! Still more indignant felt Miss Muggops at the visitor himself, and most at the deceitful serving-man ; whom she nevertheless resolved to manage to get out of the house next day, just as cleverly and as quietly as they had got in.

Hark ! his name was Sol—Solomon, forsooth. For all that, he stayed a wonderfully long time with his master, apparently responding to him in very easy tones, more than once breaking out in a disputing style, if not even a cross answer. Then he came down the stair without his shoes, so softly, turning over the letter discontentedly, as if he disapproved of it. Letter ! Was it not a mere pretext for his going out that evening, all the way to Chelmstone, where the only post-office was, a mile off ; but no doubt for the grand object in view, as the election business lay there. When he found it was so far away, however, on asking at the bar window, he seemed really out of humour, grumbling without the least concealment, and offering to pay for a safe messenger himself. This did Miss Muggops promptly undertake, marking at the same time, with great closeness, the singular aspect of this Solomon, ere he again retreated to the kitchen hearth, where he found apparent content in glowing logs, a mug of ale and a long pipe, with the help of her poor father's easy manners as he saw that customers were served. Only one or two road-folks had dropped in or gone, before the usual evening circle formed ; and she could already hear her father addressing the stranger as Master Solomon, even as Sol, unsuspecting of the truth which she thought best reserved at present to herself. That very chimney-corner, sacred to old Dockett, the parish-clerk, who was certain ere long to come gravely shuffling in, as if by accident, from his own dull hearth near by—this questionable new-comer had taken it, perhaps even taken his particular pipe, his exclusive mug ; for each time the door opened, he was conspicuous in that bright recess,

making himself strangely at home, notwithstanding the dismay shown towards him from the first minute by Sukey. That he was really in some way equivocal, appeared manifest in his open satisfaction at this very prejudice of the red-haired serving-wench, which prejudice grew to dread at his obvious knowledge of the fact; for he went the length, as she averred that night, of confidential glances on his part, making sudden faces at her in the distance; while the unwonted progress he made in the good graces of the vicious old black cat, that ultimately rubbed herself against his legs, fixed him in Sue's inmost horror.

But, for that matter, the landlord and he made great way together. He was certainly not much to look at, being a little meagre man, of an age very hard to tell; for, though he wore a wig, there were bristles of dark hair from under it; and it was only round one eye that the puckers were like a fishing-net at the corner ring, because the other was a wall-eye, with which it was doubtful if he saw at all. With the one that did see, he made up for this, it was so shinily black and knowing. Then he might be a degree knock-kneed; but so active a fellow, all springs and sinews, turning out in the end to be double-jointed, with a thumb he could bend twice as far back as Muggops's—it was really rare to see. Nor was Joe Muggops one to mind a little plainness of countenance, caused by misfortune. He quickly perceived in Mr. Solomon a degree of experience, of familiarity with life, and acquaintance with the real world, which were the more astonishing, inasmuch as he seemed rather school-learned, and must have been one of “the light-weights.” His knowledge of town was far superior to the common; added to which he had apparently a spice of the devil in him, being altogether such a cross-grained, thankless, queer sort of a codger, that Muggops was pleased by some slight appreciation from him.

Above all, he sneered at politics; only tittering, in a singular, dry way, at election matters in a place like

Hinchbridge; which rose to a fit of laughter more uncommon still, at the likelihood of his master having been turned from the "Deane Arms" on that account. The governor, as he chose to call him, *might* have come on such matters, though he scarcely fancied so; and he cackled all the more, in that chick-chicking, sputtering, half-sneezing style, like one who really cared little about the matter. What was the old gentleman's business on the journey, or his pleasure in it, Sol had not in fact the least notion; nor why his master had wished to stay a night at the "Arms," unless because it was the country, and he wanted a night's rest.

"Ah! the old gent's name—he! he! he! That was a different question—didn't he, Mr. Solomon, know it? Of course he did. But as, somehow, the old gentleman didn't wish it known, that journey—which was nothing strange, for the governor was whimsical—why, no offence."

And he only winked to Muggops, so that Susan imagined herself a sharer of it. "It was no offence by any means," the landlord said. "People who might be proud of their names," pursued Mr. Solomon, grinning, "travelled *incog.* every day." "Every day," agreed honest Joe; "partic'ler, he had heard, over the Continent." But Mr. Solomon was not proud of his own name, nor had he any reason for travelling *incog.* Therefore he told it; it was Smith—Sol Smith—"And a very good name," Muggops heartily responded; "what was more, honest and above-board, not to say common in a free country." Again Master Smith sneered.

Well, Muggops had known a very fair sparrer or two of that name—a deal of science one of 'em had, too. Whereat Smith, with one of his queer looks, appeared on the point of confiding something more as to himself, if not his master; had not the old parish-clerk come past the bar, nodding as usual to Miss Muggops, and coughing as he took off his comforter.

The last fear of Mr. Muggops was dismissed, as he saw his new guest make way civilly enough for old Dockett, whose expectant stare sufficed for that purpose; while Sukey did not need to see the vacant holding-out of old Dockett's hand, unaccompanied by words, ere she hastened with the special pipe for his behoof. The respectable parish-clerk did seem rather taken flat, as the host thought, by the presence in that familiar spot of a pure stranger, with manners so brisk and easy; yet Mr. Dockett's first interjectional replies were never anything but brief, even as concerned his health or the weather, until he had puffed a few asthmatic gasps from within him, through that yard of clay, and tasted the cream of some old October, drawn by Joe himself, in his own exclusive tankard. It was not only to new faces he was distant, as was soon proved; for, after two or three well-known cronies had arrived, seating themselves quietly in front, and graciously received into his conversation, there came stoutly tramping-in a short, squat, sturdy man, with a pug nose and a mouth open with news, who took off an old hat in particular respect to Mr. Dockett, before bumping himself down on the opposite settle, eager to claim his notice and get in some important tidings. The landlord at that moment was not in sight, having carefully taken up the supper-tray for the parlour, so that Tom Hubbard the cobbler's communication, which he scarce could have spoken for breathlessness about it, appeared by his hurry at the sound of Muggops on the stair, to require that worthy publican's absence. "Mr. Dockett, Mr. Dockett, sir!" impatiently reiterated the cobbler. Yet Mr. Dockett had returned his first salutation but stiffly, and now turned his head with austerity. "Well, Thomas?" he said, assuming a feeble dignity, "what now? But have a care—have a care at present, Thomas, until public affairs gets settled hereabout. It's dangerous, my good man. Not but what a little discussion be 'lowable at other times—I don't object to it—I don't fear you in a argument,

I hope? Eh? eh? eh?" The old parish-clerk looked round pompously, half-coughing, half-crowing; and a general chorus of assent responded from the front, in which the voice of Master Solomon joined. The irritation of the cobbler was only repressed by his eagerness to disburden himself. "Come, none o' that!" he persisted, reaching over towards old Dockett. "P'raps ye han't heard it yet—but I say it's a ticklish matter for the 'Pig,' and it called blue, to ha' took—took—took!——"

He stopped short, stuttering as if he had seen a spectre, apparently at sight of the strange serving-man beyond other attentive heads. Solomon Smith had fixed his one piercing little black eye on the cobbler, and when the latter sank back silent, the former made an uncouth grimace at him. Then this same Smith, coolly enough, expressed surprise to Mr. Dockett, and united with the rest in urging for Tom Hubbard's meaning, till the return of Muggops changed their talk.

Thenceforth Smith was no less familiar with the cobbler, indeed, than with all the others; knowing their names at once, and suiting himself to them when he thought fit; inclusive of the constable, called Smith also, who recognized him from previous view at the "Arms," in fact, the moment they joined company; as well as of Dick Cox, a farmer's man who dropped in late on his way home, and staid till the last, to show he was not poaching. But the cobbler, at first struck dumb, was over and over again put-out by the stranger's sharpness, joined with the very queer way he took to, of calling him Tom, or Hubbard, and letting out odd knowledge of the trade, and the secret societies, and Tom Paine himself; finally, Smith triumphed for the night, to the extreme mirth of all present, by ridiculous hints as to Hubbard's piece of "buff" news and the similar colour of his own new leather breeches, which the cobbler did not make bold enough to deny. In fact Hubbard was Joe Muggops's hardest customer to deal

with, being disputations beyond common; unless mellowed by ale, of which he drank less, when not treated to it, than he smoked very cheaply; breaking a new *gratis*-pipe almost every night, through arguments that were of a riskish nature, owing to their constant obstinacy about British rights.

Yet for all this putting down, Hubbard quite inclined to Mr. Smith, as he took care to call him; so soon as the latter had found out he was a bird-fancier, and had proved himself the most knowing man possible about fancy-birds; though for his own part, he, Smith, cared nothing for them. And Mr. Solomon didn't mind standing him an extra pot of the landlord's best, upon the strength of it; so that when the cobbler's wife sent a message for him in the end, to say he was wanted, he retired far mellowed than usual. Mr. Sol thought fit to take the air at the door at the same time, as if to help him out, or explain matters with Dame Hubbard: and they found it a fine moonlight evening, in which Muggops stood beside his daughter, speaking to a decent woman with a basket, in a coal-scuttle bonnet and old shawl.

At that the cobbler visibly started, and for a moment drew back.

"What—mother Hubbard?" croaked the strange man, with a laugh. "Hold hard, then, Thomas, my lad—leave me to talk with her."

"Been all the way to Chelms't'n, though, Missus Sarah?" they heard Muggops saying.

"Tut!" muttered the cobbler boldly, "its nubbut old Sarah fro' the Grange."

"Ah, that have I, Mr. Muggops," said Sarah, "or I couldn't 'a answered for the post-letter was gave me, nor bought my own Missis's groceries. Yes, Miss—and as to the 'Red Lion,' they've the rooms free at present, also a chay, likely enough. Though they *was* busy of course, they said—and whoever it was, they'd need to let 'em know early."

Miss Emma had made signs in vain to the straightforward Sarah, who was the safe messenger she had found for the old gentleman's letter; with the addition of a private inquiry on her own part at a Chelmsstone inn, at which her father would have betrayed his full astonishment, but for a pull by the arm he could not mistake.

"Hem—well," said Muggops, checking himself. "All right down the way, Missus Sarah? Master Noogent at home yet—the young missuses about their usual? Madam Smith also, I hopes?"

"Missis Smythe, if yer please, Mr. Muggops, as it's pertickler in the fam'ly," corrected Sarah, drawing herself up with a genteel air, somewhat dowdy as she was in walking attire, and certainly plain of feature; though not old, as the cobbler had alleged.

"No offence, nor none meant," the landlord of the "Blue Pig" hastened to reply, in a propitiating tone. "Smythe, I 'ort to said—but some'ow we an't seed you much o' late, Miss Sarah—wot's wrong? Nothin' atwixt friends, as is to be hoped." The Grange damsel gave a slight turn to her head which spoke volumes, as if there might be reasons; considering Miss Emma Muggops's active care of the "Blue Pig," with her interest in managing a widowed father, whose bulky vigour was not yet decayed, nor an occasional rollicking glance unknown to his eye.

"Come, father," interposed Miss Muggops, stepping forward, "Mrs. Smythe don't like late hours, I know—besides 'tis dullish down the Grange footpath by oneself."

A rather self-complacent look of Mr. Muggops to Mr. Sol Smith had been responded to by one of a very knowing kind indeed; though it was more than was expected when Smith advanced, in a wonderfully gallant manner for his age and appearance, thanking Mrs. Sarah by name on account of the letter, and offering to see her home. With but temporary hesitation, simpering

her acknowledgment, the maid-servant consented, and took but a stiff leave of the "Blue Pig" as she led off to the back style-way, down the moonlit bank toward the houses among trees. Miss Emma had flounced into the porch, still waiting her father's ear: Muggops himself stared, the cobbler giving a horse-laugh. Suddenly he slapped the landlord on the shoulder and said, very boldly, "Joe Muggops, yer ha' done it an' I admire—er—admire yer sperrit! Buff—no—bubbub—*bufferer* a long way, and I'll—I'll stand *by* ye!" Then clapping his old hat firmly down upon his head, out of shape, the cobbler marched as straight out as his legs would carry him, whistling defiantly so long as he was in hearing.

"Wot *does* the man mean?" said Muggops, turning in. Neither did Emma give him the full alarm of her interpretation; convinced, indeed, that this Smith was a designing character, however respectable might be his master, she only took care to have the old gentleman informed ere bed-time that there were rooms at the "Red Lion" in Lower Chelmsstone, and a chaise to take them there early next day. So when his man returned at leisure, he found the landlord rather gloomily waiting to inform him, that the chaise was fixed upon. Master Sol was to go for it before breakfast. "Rather sorry for it, Master Sol," said Muggops, "for I an't jealous, look ye!"

"He! he! he!" rejoined Solomon Smith. "As to the *place*, I 'ar not. A dull hole, fit to set a fellow mad—worse than most country parts, even. Gov'nor up yet, though? Didn't notice the light, somehow, to the back."

"'Cause there wasn't none," answered the host, simply. "Seems to like moonlight, I fancy. Asked if it was you, down the path too."

"Oh," said Mr. Solomon. "Nothink more, though?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if he watched ye a bit—till I put his honour up to the thing, like. Then he

laughed, in course," Muggops added, "an' says he, 'it's no more nor nat'ral.'"

Smith winced a little. "It's a *way* of watching folks he has," was his explanation. "For my part, I don't mind it, if we only clear out of this Hinchbridge. You're watched all along here, like a cockchafer in a bottle."

"Blessed if ye an't," coincided Muggops, heaving a sigh as he showed him to a dark bed-closet adjoining, "like a hoss as is heavy backed to run."

As Master Sol undressed, he might have been seen to muse curiously, as one that had been struck by a thought, but lost the track of it with some disappointment. He was restless in his snorting sleep, too, this Solomon; as Muggops might have heard, if he himself had not slumbered the sound sleep of the just, snoring regularly.

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD GENTLEMAN SETTLING DOWN

THE aforesaid Solomon having accordingly risen early next morning and set off to Chelmstone for the chaise, returned a considerable while after breakfast time in high dudgeon; on foot, almost fasting besides, with the indignant intelligence, that although he had seen the wheels of more than one such conveyance washed, yet for him or his governor none could be spared. Their fame had preceded him, and joke as it had seemed the night before, he had been made as cross as two sticks by the seriousness with which everybody took it. The young mistress of the Hinchbridge tavern viewed it with perfect gravity, which began to affect the landlord also; but what was worst, the old gentleman himself, after having seemed rather indifferent till the difficulty occurred, became so determined at the air of opposition again, that as the refusal of the "Deane Arms" had apparently inclined him to Hinchbridge, the coolness of

the "Red Lion" now irritated him into sudden preference for Chelmsstone, whither he at once resolved to walk. Leaving his man to pack up and settle the bill, with strict injunctions to remain in charge till sent for, he nodded good-bye to Miss Muggops, hastily returning the salutation of her father at the door, deeply deferential, nay wistful, though it was—and disdained even to ask the way, while he set out at a most decided pace along the village, striking his walking-cane on the ground out of mere determinedness, for he showed as good a pair of legs as need-be for the occasion. Opposition was the very thing, according to his man, that set him upon having a point carried, so that it would not be surprising if he took it into his head to stop at the borough town, dingy brick as it was, with brewery chimneys, tanneries, paper-making, and a canal, a deal duller than Hinchbridge itself, to which place Solomon had almost fancied him disposed; and this gave Master Sol the more evident annoyance, as he owned he had had a mind to see the election business, the only thing that gave the place a stir. Besides, as Joe Muggops shrewdly suspected, he had felt no objection to the chance of getting out of sight a little, when life was to be seen; and really it was unpleasant to be always watched. The main attraction of the hustings-business for that day would be over by two in the afternoon, leaving the rest to a canvass till the polling-day; and the landlord of the "Blue Pig" was able to feel for a man's impatience, seeing all Hinchbridge had gone off to it, while his own excitement could scarce be guarded from Emma's careful eye. Great as her relief was to know they were getting rid of their guests, the strange follower made some progress in her good graces by all sorts of odd jobs he did to spend the time, being far too restless to keep idle, as well as handy beyond everything; the more especially did he gain on her by his cordial wish to depart, his equal indifference to buffs and blues, and the immeasurable superiority he accorded to London town

over every other residence; added to his unwilling though unmistakable subjection to a master, whom he perhaps would have been as glad to get rid of as Miss Muggops was.

The second evening arrived; the crisis at Chelmstone had been got over by the afternoon, resulting after all in the re-election of Colonel Deane, despite that gentleman's unfortunate absence; for the intruding Buff party had seen fit to withdraw at the eleventh hour, notwithstanding reasonable prospects of success. Among the returning rout of villagers, it is only important to relate, that the stout elderly stranger was conspicuous beyond all, as he vehemently retraced his emphatic steps into Hinchbridge. The "Red Lion," at Chelmstone, it proved, had been as full as the "Deape Arms" nearer hand; the "Black Bull" had been still more suspicious and inhospitable to so questionable a guest. To disclaim political sides was fruitless in that county at such a time; and finding no rest for the sole of his foot amid those troubled waters, the old gentleman was stoutly making his way back again.

At the outer wicket of the tavern stood Muggops, truly unlike the patriarch of the flood, with his back that way, receiving such incoherent accounts as the cobbler could give in his present state. The landlord's head drooped a little, though he could be heard to say, "Well, this Smith, the agent for the Buffs, were a youngish feller, you say? Can't be the same, then. Besides, I knowed it was his man's name already. Stuff! And Sol says, they'll be a message for him off directly, if the 'Red Lion's' got room."

The cobbler glanced up, and Mr. Muggops started with joy. Out of the porch looked Master Solomon, briskly expectant, but slunk sullenly in at the sight. Miss Emma was at her side-bar counter, talking over it with open door to a tall corporal in undress, without side-arms. He had come back from Notley at the first news, which allowed of the recruiting-party's

entrance being legal again. "We're filling up fast, Miss Emma," said he, "and shan't be here long, I fear. War will be the line of action, Miss, for there's hawks abroad. And then——"

"Ah!" returned Miss Muggops, blending a smart tendency to the coquettish with her sentimental tone: but the startling sight of their returned guest, supposed to be got rid of, confused her greatly. The corporal did not see the reason, he only leant across and whispered fears of the militia, of gamekeepers, perhaps of insinuating and heartless strangers. How the conversation could have led round, is unknown; yet as the London stage rattled past once more to the "Deane Arms," showing empty places, but not leading to a movement on the part of Smith and his master, Emma Muggops persisted in uneasiness at their stay. "It mayn't be the election," she reasoned, "but there's something I don't like. So odd to stop here, you know!"

"Not at all," denied the corporal gallantly, with a look that spoke volumes. "Well, but father is such a—can be got over so easily," Emma said; "and the Deane people have a spite at him. If anybody stopped here, that they don't know."—"Then there's *one* fellow would be sure," interrupted the corporal, in a jealous manner, "to suck it out. He's a spy, as I always said, is that dandy gamekeeper."

But dinner for the upstairs-parlour had been ordered, and Miss Muggops had to see to it: wherefore the recruiting-corporal took his leave, to march refreshed through the twilight into Chelmstone. The important guest settled himself once more for the night; his odd attendant again reconciled himself to matters around the kitchen hearth, and mingled with the evening sociality there. It was a still larger throng, that evening, whom Muggops had to entertain; nay, it seemed to him that for all the oddities of Sol Smith, with his occasional cantankerousness, he grew popular. The novelty, the curiosity, the very ambiguity of the old gentleman's unobtrusive

private presence, it struck Joe himself, brought increased custom and appeared to promise luck. After the circle had dropped away for the night, he settled himself down opposite the slightly-yawning Solomon, and would fain have gossiped more intimately over a final pipe.

"I tell you wot it is, my boy," said Muggops, sagaciously, "he's a Indy Nabob—that's it. Hullo! Come?"

"He may be," was the indifferent response. "But not since I knew him. Whatever he was, since, he's retired from it. He don't want to know more of it. Neither do I. I suppose he wants to settle down. That's all."

"Well, Master Solomon, you ain't just a innocent, anyhow," returned his host, a little hurt.

The man looked up at him sharply. "Eh?" said he, eyeing Muggops with a piercing glance.

"You've seen a lot o' life, I mean," explained his companion, good-humouredly. "Been beyond the seas in your time, I don't doubt, now."

There was something in the suspicious, exploring, disturbed gleam of his new crony's eye, that was positively threatening, and accustomed as Joe Muggops was to manly resolution, made him draw back scared.

"Bless me, man!" said he, soothingly, "I meant to say you've seen furrin parts. An't you?"

"Of course," was the half-appeased answer. "Of course. If I weren't too tired, I'd describe 'em. And I'll be up early to-morrow, of course. Coach passes at eleven, don't it, for London? Of course he left word to be ready for it?"

"Not he!" replied Muggops, with an irrepressible chuckle. "Wot if he took it in his head for to settle down *here*!"

Solomon Smith stared at him, took the candle, and turned away silently, stretching himself like a very weary man. Nevertheless he did not contradict it: and there

was, at any rate, a degree of inevitable submission in all his aspect towards his master.

It really did appear as if the landlord had hit the right nail on the head, as to the old gentleman's intentions at Hinchbridge. He seemed to have taken a decided liking for the neighbourhood in general, the place in particular, and the "Blue Pig" tavern above all. The worthy publican even began to flatter himself, that he, Joseph Muggops, was slightly included in the partiality; while on his own part, he regarded his guest, however distantly, with the utmost reverence. Hinchbridge was by no means essential to him, but he liked it; the accommodation, though limited, was enough; he was capable, even, of making a lengthened stay; nay, there might be possibilities of rendering the "Blue Pig" a superior establishment, more suitable to the purpose.

It was about a week since his arrival, and already, somehow, he had seemed more inclined to be friendly with his host. Muggops quivered all over, and promised every possible exertion. The window, opposite which the old gentleman sat, was open; he had his feet up on the sill, his chair leant backwards on the hind-legs, and the newspaper spread out to the full before him with both hands, his large gold spectacles on, reading the affairs of the world. He turned round a little, just saying, "Very well, landlord, that 'll do. I'm satisfied with you, I may say, for the present." It was a lovely afternoon, and Hinchbridge-back, down over the bank to the houses among the trees, looked splendid; so that Muggops, fancying his guest cast an occasional glance of pleasure at the view, was about to withdraw in grateful joy, leaving him to sip his punch and read in solemn state. The Doctor, however, showed an inclination to prolong the conversation by a question or two, evincing interest in the neighbours. It was rather lonely, no doubt, that way of life. He might really wish to settle down. He asked which was the vicar-

age, where the curate and his mother lived. What sort of man was the Squire, Mr. Ashburton—was he proud and pompous, like old Deane—had he a family? Ah; that was the Grange, was it? A pleasantish-looking old house, newly white-washed—oh, the Smiths? Smythe, did he say—Mrs. Smythe? A widow, of course? Any family? Oh—poor but genteel! And the Doctor condescended to laugh, feeling audibly with his hand in one pocket. He was knowing, was the Doctor: and well-nigh looked confidential to Muggops, for it was as certain that he was rich as that Muggops was no Dutchman, though neither of the two pretended to gentility. A widow could not take him in, either. Muggops descended chuckling silently.

Of course the man Sol, to whom his host made this known, did not share the satisfaction. He was a most inconsistent, contradictory character, that Solomon. He had been contentedly enough engaged all forenoon with his "governor," bolted up privately in the little out-house they had begun to monopolize for their curiosities, to make what Solomon stated were "experiments;" and this business, joined to a sort of pride he took in the oddest parts of the collection, such as dead frogs, beetles stuck through with pins, and other insects or reptiles, had kept him in such good tune, that during the afternoon he had taken a fancy to repaint the tavern sign with his own hand, and had begun to make the "Pig" look freshly "Blue," in fact magnificent as a porcupine outside a show at a fair, with tail curling five times more than ever, and prouder far, like a corkscrew directed to a contiguous bottle. He was at that moment up a ladder, helping Muggops to put in a new piece of thatch, with Susan at his beck and call, submissively handing up the straw. In the sunshine it began to look quite gorgeous and golden, and he was full of a proposal to whitewash all over, the next thing.

But the above-mentioned communication of the land-

lord turned his mood to gloom. He grew wonderfully fractious for the evening; which would have been of less importance with the ordinary customers, some of whom sometimes gave in the more to him, the more he contradicted, brow-beat, or bullied. Nay, between old Dockett and Tom Hubbard he was a useful sort of block, as it were, and stood out against Muggops without fear or favour. It chanced, however, that the Hall gamekeeper looked in that evening, and, after a little smart-tongued dalliance at the bar-room door, where Miss Gibbs had brought her company with her seam to Emma, he joined the kitchen circle with a social air. He was a well-made, proper young fellow, Francis Murphy, if he had not just the corporal's height, nor his easy manners; being ordinarily distant a bit, to the landlord's mind, as if he fancied his Irish blood above his station; in fact, they said he was some bye-blow of a gentleman. For all that, he had a good place of it, so that Muggops would have preferred his looking after Emma, before Corporal Clay's attentions to her were marked, had he but spoken out fairly; and that evening he had a very friendly way with him indeed. If he had any grudge at Smith, he was too civil to show it before people: it was Smith's conduct to the gamekeeper in particular that was vexatious.

Not that Master Sol exactly cared to quarrel; he seemed to have no spite at Murphy beyond others: but the fellow was such a queer fish, that he was excused among the rest, when he gave a flat denial, or made a bitter hit without cause, throwing an air into it, as if more was meant than met the eye. He knew all about the poaching troubles of the neighbourhood; he was perfectly aware that if Dick Cox were absent, the Hall preserves were in danger. Everything, too, about the election business, he had gathered up, with the ridiculous notions about the Doctor, whom he yet somehow contrived to make the more mysterious, the more important, as he cleared him. The idea he gave every

one of the Doctor's knowledge, his connections, and his powers in general, was truly impressive. Compared with him, if he really settled in Hinchbridge, what was the curate, the Chelmstone apothecaries and physician, the old rector—what even lame Squire Ashburton, who read books, or the mighty Sir Thomas himself, and the Colonel, whom he implied to be grand noodles. The amount of flying rumour and village gossip the fellow had picked up so fast, was wonderful to Muggops himself, who stared at him more than once. As for the keeper, he kept his dark eyes fixed more and more on Solomon Smith, with the brown colour deepening in his swarthy cheek, holding himself very cool, but silent; till in the end he got up, seeing Miss Emma no longer occupied at her bar closet, and quietly joined her, in a long private talk, that grew pretty confidential, as if they bade fair to be friends at the least.

The ill-humour of Master Sol apparently went off with Keeper Murphy. He was a funny fellow when he chose, full of scraps of knowledge that were often startling; as when he played odd feats with cards, told a fortune from an egg-shell, or conjured with a hat; when he stuffed one end of a long tobacco pipe into the fire, and lit a sudden flame at the other, next him; and turned a red spring rose into a white one with some brimstone matches; then showed what clever tricks he had taught the black cat to perform at his bidding: all to the great terror of Sukey, and the common wonder. He winked at times like a goblin as he puffed at his pipe, keeping all the smoke in, till he would let it out of him at any part he chose, as if he had been a creature full of it. Then, if he had been sharp before, as bitter as gall at an answer, with the driest saws or most unaccountably disagreeable anecdotes at command, he now volunteered to lead the way in a song, croaking forth a very discordant ditty, with the uncouthest of choruses to be joined in by all. The "Blue Pig" rang with it, and with the joviality ensuing, amidst which Master Sol fell

a-coughing like to kill himself. He went beyond himself that night, keeping up his part not only by various voices, which proceeded once or twice apparently from other people, but also in language that often turned out to be not his own; such bits of recitation and play-acting passages as, when he wished to put any one down before, he had showered and heaped on them to his own credit. They dropped away as usual, even the old parish-clerk with his comforter round his neck, by no means less inclined to the "Pig" because of its new inmates or their lengthened stay.

Joe Muggops, only, felt somewhat troubled. "Come, Master Sol," he said, "mind them Hall folks—we musn't spite 'em, just."

"*You* musn't, perhaps," said Smith, coolly. "But I'd rather. It suits me, you see."

"Well, wot ha' you got against Keeper Murphy?" asked the landlord. "He an't a bad sort of a feller, on the whole. Don't go and bear no grudges."

"I don't," was the answer. "I've none against *him*. I'd rather he had against *me*. Look, have ye got e'er a spare waistcoat about ye?"

Mr. Muggops stared. "'Cause if ye have, you'd better get it made a strait one," pursued his queer companion. "Supposing we stick long hereabouts, the'll be somebody to need it, that's all. Mind I don't say who needs it most, for I don't know yet."

Joe Muggops merely laughed within his own broad chest, and perhaps thought the man a little cracked already, though a good soul at bottom. The less likely he would be, perhaps, to go farther wrong.

They had thus been nearly a fortnight at the "Blue Pig," without a sign of weariness appearing on the chief lodger's part; indeed, his leisure had seemed to hang less heavily on his hands each day, so that every recurrence of the coach hour evidently cost him smaller thought, and whatever Miss Muggops looked, yet her father's inclinations might have been supposed to square

precisely with those of his guest ; when one pleasant evening, as the latter sat busy in his usual way with the London newspaper, at the open parlour window, after a whole day's peregrination of the neighbourhood, the door softly unclosed behind him, somebody who had entered began to wipe the table, then shuffled a little on the floor, appeared to dust the mantelpiece, hesitated, lingered, finally gave a slight hoarse cough. It had of late been mostly by the tidy hands of the smart Emma, despite her prejudices, that the doubtful old gentleman had been tended ; his apparent supposition was therefore natural.

"Tea-time already, miss?" said the old gentleman, briskly, without turning round from his engrossing occupation ; though it might have been thought he was rather looking out over the folds of the large newspaper, through a particularly large gold eye-glass, at a pretty perspective, more than usually distinct at that moment even to the naked eye, which offered itself to view beyond the garden slope. Holding up his broad-sheet, however, before him, and spreading it out with both arms to refold it, as Englishmen even in those days began to find it necessary, the lodger concealed his further prospect, as if to absorb himself in advertisements. "Ha—hum—very well. Thank you," observed he, abstractedly. "You may set it down, my dear." Clear sounds of remoter voices still intruded from below, and there was a sweet evening gossip in the air, but the Doctor was beyond doubt recommitted with stern attention to practical matters.

"Hem—ahem—aho," modestly coughed a much rougher throat than the comely bar-keeper's ; and the old gentleman shifting bolt round, turned his face in the most decidedly interrogative manner that way. "Oh, Mr. Muggops!" said he, rather sharply. "Well—eh? Well, Mr. Muggops?"

"Haxin' pardin, sir," blurted out the big landlord, poising alternately on either leg, and giving a respectful

duck down with his cropped bullet head, while he smoothed down a refractory tuft in front of it, gazing uncomfortably round from his own best furniture into the old soft-crowned hat which he invariably wore about the house, as if the business lay there in a sort of nest. To say truth, the sight of Joseph thus unwontedly dis-crowned might have been propitiatory, instead of annoying as it seemed to do, in any less suspicious eyes than those of the irritable lodger; and there was even a misplaced pocket-handkerchief in the bottom of the hat, clammy-looking and compressed, which being taken up and dabbed down again by its owner, ought to have moved pity for his obvious confusion. "If one might make so bold," said he, throwing out one foot behind him as he stepped toward the window, "I was wishing a word or so. Fact is, yer honour—but p'raps I'd as well send up Hemmar fust, with the tea-tray, sir?"

"Nothing of the kind, sir," was the peremptory answer, while with a hand significantly plunged into an ample breeches-pocket, the lodger for a moment regarded his landlord as if the business might be pecuniary. A business it plainly was; there was trouble in Muggops's aspect. The old gentleman emphatically thrust to the window-lattice, threw down his newspaper, and at one impatient bounce from his arm-chair to the hearth-rug, placed himself there erect before the fireless grate (that day decorated by the sedulous taste of Miss Emma with early flower-grass), his coat-skirts up, his stout legs firmly planted apart, altogether drawing thither the subject looks of his host. "Something of consequence, I see—something new, eh? That can't be settled by my man—by Sol, I mean? Go on, then—out with it, pray! Anything further to explain for people's satisfaction—anything fresh to quiet this absurd little place? Ha, landlord! I see it in your eye, eh? Well, now?"

"Why, no offence, Doctor," said the landlord, plucking up firmness at last, "no offence meant at all, your washup, but a man must look to his means o' life, d'ye

see, sir, more especially with a fam'ly dependent like, as I may say Hemmar is," at which Muggops took breath, and was fixed by the stout old gentleman's eye of unspeakable severity, fascinating him, as it were. "And as good a girl," added he irrelevantly, "not to say well-looking, saving yer honour's presence, as is in the parish."

"I suppose there *is* a point," was the testy rejoinder of his lodger, whose complexion always inclined to red, but now blazed forth from a scrupulously white cravat of ample folds, as if the fireplace were kindling up in it, "though bless me if I see it yet. What's all this to *me*, I ask? Pray look this way, Mr. Muggops, and inform me at once."

Mr. Muggops again looked that way, though seeing nothing auxiliary in the old gentleman's expression, he once more examined his hat round and round. "I don't deny," said he at length, on a sudden suggestion through that source, which enabled him to lift his nearest eye with perfect composure, "I 'aint going to deny as I vally your honour's custom—it's a right-down credit to the 'ouse besides, it is—and so I reckons it according."

"On the whole," returned the old gentleman, contemplating him more benignly, "I'm satisfied. Yes, Muggops, on the whole I'm satisfied, and I hope to be so." He had taken out a great gold watch, and made as if disposed again to privacy.

"That's wot I tell 'em—you're satisfied, and you hopes so to be," said the latter, convulsively. "'Twon't do, though, with them Hall folks. Them Hall folks, your honour, is rightdown master and more, about Hinchbridge."

"You're in trouble, it seems, then," ejaculated the stout old gentleman, with an irritated air, "about harbouring such doubtful characters—eh, Mr. Muggops?"

"And *no* mistake," was the decided answer. "The long and the short of it is," concluded the landlord, gloomily, "if your honour stops, just now, on'y

another blessed day—why, reason or none, the ‘Blue Pig’ won’t stop with Joe Muggops. Wotever I tells old Sloane now, *incog* or *outcog*, ‘cept that you’re fairly off by coach for good, sir—he won’t believe it. An’ I’ve got to walk pretty soft for a week or so after, too. So I’ll lose the ‘Pig’ otherwise—that’s all.”

He stood resigned, and his lodger somewhat put out. The old gentleman mused for a minute or two in considerable perplexity; looked out through the open window, up toward the “Deane Arms,” along at the squab-towered church in the evening shade of its trees, down over the slope to the yellow vicarage chimneys among the boughs, finally across the open paddock toward the farm-fields, where the old Grange garden jutted out from the high white house, only half betrayed now, by help of sunset, through thickening spring foliage.

“That alters the case a little, I admit,” said the old gentleman, pondering still. “Really, Mr. Muggops, ’twas for your own interest—I mean you well—and where else am I to stay, I’d like to know?”

Amidst the landlord’s desperation, an idea struck him, whereat he slapped his palm upon his brawny thigh. “After all,” he exclaimed, speculatively, “it’s only a week or so that’s wanted to get the blind side on ’em, and ye *might* just shift out for that time, sir—hang it, your honour, so ye might, till the quarter-sessions is blown over! Some’eres about, here, you know, Doctor—near hand an’ convenient, like, for to keep you and Mas’er Sol comf’able out o’ sight? We’d supply everythink off the bar, likewise the tap’d be drawed as required—all quiet, in course, until such time as I’d got the licence safe and correct. After that, why, I could afford to stick my tongue in my cheek at Old Sloane again, for a bit, at any rate—and as to yer honour’s custom, even out o’ doors, I won’t deny it’s a object. There’s Widow Gray’s cottage, now, down on the Squire’s ground by Hinchbrook, a tidy little place it is, in a patch o’ garden—there’s Farmer Hoby has a spare parlour nor

no youngsters, if he'd put yer up, though he do be bump-tious at times, rather—or there's—Lord! yes, here's the Grange close by, here! Wot run in my 'ed, I wonder, to forget the Grange! The very spot, too, it couldn't ha' come better if it was went and ordered!"

"Grange, eh?" was the sharp inquiry. "What Grange?"

"Why, right down by, there, w're I spoke o', t'other night," said Mr. Muggops, pointing. "This 'ere same house ye see a bit o', sir, through them wery back-trees. Bein' close under a man's nose, no doubt, it's apt to lie past—besides, the ticket's about blocked in with leaves, this last fortnight. One ought to make it out, some'eres, though."

"I see it, I think," said the lodger, in some surprise, after hastily stooping with his eye-glass in hand. "Oh, why, it's to let. I don't want a whole house, man!"

"No, it's 'Furnished Apartments,'" Muggops said: then, reflecting a little, he seemed to draw back from the suggestion. "They be reg'lar old-fashioned, though, and musty, like—you'd never abear 'em a week, your honour. W'y, the wery cheers is been an' got out o' Chelms't'n brokerses and bankrupt people's grandfathers—likewise there's summat about that end o' the house, they say, like a ghostess or a sperrit—an' as for lettin' 'em out such a short time, 'tan't their notion, mayhap. The folks is rather stuck-up-ish on them matters, most like, though they're neighbourly enough otherwise—they're wot you calls shabby genteel, yer honour, nor I'm sure Sarah, yonder, could't no more get up a dinner like Hemmar, here, as a stable-boy could. Widow Gray's is the place—I'll drop her a quiet word this wery ev'nin', sir, as soon as it's dusk."

"What d'ye call the people?" inquired the stout old gentleman, peremptorily. "Down yonder, I mean—what's the name, eh? By the way, I think you mentioned it before—but it's escaped me. Some fine name or other—something quite aristocratic, if I mistake not!"

And at the same time there was that whimsical, sarcastic, self-willed humour in his eye, which had before puzzled Mr. Muggops.

"Missis Smythe she calls herself," returned the latter, "likewise that's wot they goes by with the folks, here. Young Master Noogent, he holds by it pertickler—a bright chap, too, an' some right to be proud—stands five foot nine without his shoes already, and weighs nine-stun' seven to a nicety, with a wonderful good fore-arm, owin' to cricket, no doubt——"

"Ah, a sporting youth?" said the old gentleman, with indulgent attention to the point. "That's he, perhaps, with the fishing-rod and the dog, yonder?"

Merry voices again came up from the direction of the Grange, where he pointed: there was a last golden light beyond the hollow lane that way, showing a secluded turn of the village-stream, where a boy sprang up, equipped and accompanied as had been said; though next moment followed by a taller lad, whose steps were far less lively.

"No, that's the young 'Squire as will be," returned the landlord. "T'other's Master Noogent—an' as for anythin' like sport, o' late, he an't some'ow the least heart to it—to my notion, he's regular moped with this here ditchwater sort o' place—he won't put up with it wery long, I warrant me—he'll be off out on't, I bet ye, let Madam Smythe do wot she will—he's too much pluck in him for Hinchbridge. But Smythe, bless ye, sir, it's nothink more, to my mind, nor a piece of stuck-up genteelness, as they calls it, for to keep their distance, like—they holds off main shy as regards folks in their station, they sees no company, an' an't got no relations as can be heard on, nor no friends—except it's Lawyer Price o' Notley, w'ere Madam Smythe come from, which it's like to be noway in her favour among Hinchbridge, if she knowed it, Lawyer Price bein' so out-an-out Buff, d'ye see! An' if there's a house in the place

as is marked down against, besides the 'Pig,' it's the Grange with Bailiff Sloane."

"Oh, he marks it, does he?" the old gentleman responded, briskly rubbing his hands. "Sir Thomas don't know 'em, perhaps—their affairs ain't understood, eh? Not quite open to the public I suppose? Large house, too, though oldish—saw it from the road, I recollect—where did they get it? Why did they take it—how have they kept it up—newly white-washed, good garden, excellent repair, turf well kept—ain't they embarrassed—in debt about here, perhaps?"

"Pays ready on the nail, your honour, for *our* share of it," answered Mr. Muggops, "*and* reg'lar. Can't for the life o' me understand how they does it. Summat odd about 'em altogether."

"Still," said the old gentleman, struck by the thought—"the rooms might suit me—well enough for a week or two?"

"Prime—the verry exact thing after all, sir," said his landlord, much relieved.

"Stands well to the road, that Grange, eh, Muggops? Might make a fine place, with money—a splendid head-inn or a hotel, even, some day?"

"Not bad—fust-rate, I'd say!" was the exhilarated answer. "Don't belong to the Hall, too, or the Squire either, it's a broke-down old fam'ly as used to be about, long afore my time—last heir, they say, he went off under a cloud, 'ways, to the Ingees, an' he's abroad, nor not like to come back again. Name of Cloyne, or some'at—anyhow they say, he wan't no good when he left, nor if he was here this blessed——"

"Come—well, well, landlord," interrupted his lodger, hastily, "no more of this stuff—this idle village scandal—it wearies one. To the point—I'll take it. Odd enough, certainly, to—I mean this sharp notion of yours—but—it may do." And he once more considered within himself, half amused, half frowning. His ab-

stracted eyes were turned that way, as the landlord watched him with some vague new thoughts. Vividly through the open air, fading into twilight, came the end view of one gable, white and slate-blue from among the crisp green early foliage; a merry young party were separating, some inward, some away by the vicarage clover-glebe down to the farm-meadows. Whether the happy youthful figures, and the unconscious liveliness of their voices, suggested reflection to Joe Muggops, were hard to say; but he cast a somewhat uneasy survey towards his musing lodger, to calculate his age, to consider his air and appearance, and wonder about his real name, on a rather startling notion of his motives at Hinchbridge, his reason for such queer interest in the place. "Yes, yes, Mr. Muggops, I'll take it," abruptly resumed the old gentleman, once more tranquil; while, as he at last sat down again to compose himself, his elderliness, his very tendency to corpulence and to redness in the face, in great measure dispersed any such strange speculation, as the landlord had indulged. There was nothing wildly-romantic or malignly mysterious—to outward appearance, at least—about the parlour lodger. The name of Cloyne, somehow, had been formerly a dark one about Hinchbridge; it relieved Joe's mind, to convince himself that the stranger could have nothing to do with that race.

"Well—no matter," concluded his lodger, "so far you may manage it for me. Knowing me, of course—knowing the people, too. You undertake everything, Mr. Muggops,—it's your affair, in fact—victualling department, liquors, attendance, anything Sol may want, in his odd way—the whole management, in short, for the time mentioned? Observe, nothing left to the family at this Grange—no troublesome transactions or unnecessary contact with them—a mere out-lodger, as it were, of yours—though as quietly as you like."

The landlord of the "Blue Pig" unhesitatingly engaged all in question: nothing more certain, nothing in the

world easier and more to be depended on. That very moment he would step down to Mrs. Smythe, himself; that very hour he would arrange all beforehand with Emma, at the bar, and bring up word.

"Afterwards—we'll see!" added the old gentleman, sententiously. "In that case, as I want to visit town for a-day or two—in fact, had a little business there, though not choosing to be forced to it—why, I'll help you still further, Mr. Muggops. We'll leave your door by the first coach, to-morrow forenoon, perfectly in public, of course, to all Hinchbridge. And harkee, you needn't just say, you know, to these Sloanes and people—nor for that matter, even to Master Sol, either—that we're to be back again!"

Joseph Muggops reciprocated the shrewd humour of the glance, by a knowing look that finally approached a wink; while he nodded complete intelligence. "Not a word—not to Master Sol hisself," said he firmly.

"Nor of any schemes—any plans—any grand projects, I may have, Muggops," resumed his patron with a trace of the former expression, as the landlord was edging out to commence operations. "Stay, though—my name! What's my name to be;—the name you're to give, as I'm incog? We haven't settled it yet—you don't know it—and incog, as you say, Muggops, I mean to remain since I'm forced to it. To all but *you*—this Grange not excepted. Brown—Smith—or Jones, eh?"

"Doctor—Doctor—Jones, would ye say, sir?" Muggops briskly suggested, after rubbing his forehead in some perplexity. "Or Brown—aye, Brown. Doctor Brown, I'll say, an' it'll be a sort o' mark-out from them Smythes, as they calls themselves. Wot's more, somehow I've got a sickener to the name of Smith. Lord bless ye, they'd hardly believe it! There was the Buff 'lectioners sent down a *h*agent with it—then here didn't Mas'r Sol take to it, just afore your honour? You'd a'most fancy this 'ere world were right-down got 'oll o' Smiths just now, an' wot's wuss, reg'lar a-pumpin

out of 'em this same blessed season upon the 'Blue Pig,' for no end but to ruine it, an' the lan'lord besides. To my taste, it's wulgar. Quietly speaking, yer honour, rather ye took Brown—or—or Jones."

"Exactly why I think the contrary, Mr. Muggops," was the perverse reply. "I don't at all *want* to be believed in, my good fellow—I don't aim at composing Hinchbridge, or propitiating your great Deane—I've no desire, but the reverse, to let 'em go to sleep again. I'm incog, don't you perceive. Mind my name's Smith—Doctor Smith, if you will. Part of the plan, my good fellow, you understand?"

It was but dimly intelligible to the landlord after all, but he professed the acutest perspicacity, and promised exact obedience; then closing the door carefully, as upon a secret of rather perilous character, he put on his hat with unusual deliberation, slipped down stairs on tiptoe, procured his coat in a surreptitious manner, and, at the first opportunity, let himself out in haste, by the backway, into the Grange footpath. Solomon had gone up with his master's candles, Emma was bringing down the tea-tray, while Sue had the whole evening custom on her hands, nor did the shades of spring twilight expose him to notice on his errand.

When the landlord, not much more than a quarter-of-an-hour after, re-emerged from his back-scellery, in his shirt-sleeves, looking as if he had been nowhere in particular, he could yet have chuckled to see the evident good-humour of Master Sol. The fellow knew by that time they were leaving, and openly made the fact conduce to his sociality at the kitchen-fire, with old Mr. Dockett and the constable, Hubbard the cobbler, and Dick Cox from the farm; not at all a complimentary reason, doubtless; but it seemed as if he would have been amiable on that score, even to the gamekeeper or Bailiff Sloane. And after Muggops in his stead had answered the upstairs hand-bell (though ingeniously suspended by Solomon himself, with a string into his

master's parlour), he came down again quite secure, greatly relieved from anxiety, filled with a strong expectation of future benefit from his strange lodger's patronage; feeling, in fact, through everything — whim, wilfulness, incog, or by-name—an irresistible belief in the intentions of "Doctor Smith." But he suffered no glimpse of it all to be perceived by Solomon; nay, when all were gone but the two of them, and Master Sol would evidently have fain come round about any private feeling of Muggops's, in parting confidence over a pipe and pot, the latter kept very close indeed. He affected dulness; he was sorry, but it couldn't be helped. "The Hall folks, besides, couldn't be stood against; and now even, though 'twere known the Doctor only wanted to settle down, and his name was Smith, and he'd got money enough, and hadn't any politics whatever, and no spite—no spite at all at them——"

"Ah?" said Solomon, quickly, as he watched the landlord's eye, "has he taken a spite at 'em on account of it?"

"Bless ye—none in the world—not the least!" Joe hastened to say, in irrepressible alarm; "afore I'd time to say Sloane were down on me, and you'd have to shift—why, says the Doctor, I've to go off at any-rate, he says. Lord love ye, he were like a lamb about it."

"Ho. Ah. Of course," rejoined the man, gloomily. "And the governor's name's Smith, it seems. Well, then, cases are altered. It wasn't *my* name, after all—nothing but a feeler, to know how he'd say himself, when asked. To tell the truth, I thought he'd some game in view, besides settling down in this hole, here. Mind he's a deep un, landlord, is the governor, and worth watching. Sorry he's taken a spite at these Hall people, the vermin—rather my fault a little, perhaps? Eh?"

"Dang it, no"—reiterated Mr. Muggops, solemnly. "No fault at all—he an't got nothink o' the kind, that I'm sure o'. Bless ye. Far from it."

"Never mind," said Solomon, grimly. "Good night. Shouldn't wonder, after all, if I saw ye again. It was my family name, by the bye, that was Solomon. First name, Christian name, as they say—ho! ho! he! he! he!"—and there was something goblin-like about the tittering cackle of the man—"it's *Brutus*.—If anybody asks after me when I'm gone, tell 'em so. If I come back again, call me it—*Brutus Solomon*. On the whole, 'twouldn't be so bad stopping here in an active way, keeping it up, and sticking it in, eh? Against the whole place! Against the Hall folks—and Sloane, and old big-headed Deane, and the Squire, and the Parson, and all concerned! what a dust and a scrimmage! Never mind, though. Good night, landlord."

Honest Joe felt most astonished at the worming perseverance of the odd creature, coming so near the fact without seeming exactly to suspect it; but besides that, his mind did misgive him a little. In reality, next morning saw off both the master and man by coach, before the eyes of Hinchbridge; and the worthy Muggops felt almost as if he would have been relieved, were they never to be heard of more.

CHAPTER III.

THE TICKET OFF.

LITTLE apparent difference was as yet made at the Grange, by the letting of its "furnished apartments," through the landlord of the adjacent tavern, to his recent parlour lodger. Mr. Muggops was known to Sarah Flake, the diligent and attached adherent of Mrs. Smythe in her reversed fortunes; so far as that lady knew for herself, he was on the whole a respectable, worthy, well-meaning man, with whom they had had some slight dealings; although in reference to him now, Sarah rather denoted a silent opinion, by significant

raising of her chin and compression of her lips, that the less said of him in some respects, the better. But Mr. Muggops, with an air of pride and importance, had not for a moment stickled about the terms stated by Sarah, ere she admitted him to her mistress's presence on the business; and having not only given full satisfaction as to who the old gentleman was, with his scientific pursuits and his wishes to "settle down," but also volunteered a eulogy on his agreeable manners, pacific disposition, and open character, had finally insisted on paying down in advance the month's rent, which Mrs. Smythe said was unnecessary.

It was an end-wing of the old house which was thus concerned; happily detached before, to a great extent, and, by the subsequent arrangement of Mr. Price's clerk, so partitioned off by a little internal carpentry, as to become easily self-contained; with the former library-door alone opening out upon a piece of lawn, now made directly accessible from the gate, while the family entrance came a different way; although one window of the parlour so projected on the garden, as to render visible those of the purposed lodgings. Large windows they were on the lower floor, fashioned from an older time than those of window-taxes; raised conspicuous by the turfed mound of back-lawn near the flower-plots, with the light shown through and through, here and there, by another opposite, that had been an oriel when the library deserved its name.

Till this lucky event of a lodger for the end-wing, Mrs. Smythe had begun to think seriously in her own mind of two hard alternatives against worse necessity; the first, namely, to try a boarding-school and use the advantage of space in the house, with her own accomplishments, for receiving a few young ladies to educate besides her own two girls, already taught by herself with a success which surprised her. The second, to write at last, after obstinate determination and striving to avoid it, to rich relatives in high station; who had long cast

her off because she married a clergyman, only then a vicar, nor by any means understood to be of good family.

The latter idea was hardest to entertain, from the simple fact, that after all, after the Rev. James Smythe had by some portion of learning got his degree of Doctor, nay, by the help of political influence obtained a rectorate, then added to it a plurality—after getting into an important position, well off, comfortable, portly, in a house like a mansion, keeping his landau and pair—just about to receive the good opinion of the Nugent family, and perhaps to become acknowledged by them, probably intimate, invited, attended to, helped on to a bishopric—the Rev. Dr. Smythe had abruptly died. This had been bad, but worse had been the immediate discovery thereafter. He had lived fully up to his large income. He had not provided for his family, had not foreseen long enough the propriety of accumulating sufficient surplus income to leave them comfortable—meaning, in the same station as he had taken when alive; with a large mansion, a lawn and conservatory, a landau and pair, a gardener and four servants. This had been a most heinous addition to his offence, and hers, against her relations the Nugents. The real state of the case, still better known to Mrs. Smythe herself, was that the Rector, who had even taken the name of Nugent in addition to his own as a compliment to them—had died without leaving enough to pay his debts, died a positive—what she never named to herself, but what less delicate people, the Nugents themselves, would have called an insolvent, a bankrupt. Were she to write to them at last, forced by necessity, stating that her only son Nugent could not go up to Cambridge, and seemed to have wild thoughts in his head of some stranger kind—she would have to tell all this, and to beg whatever she might ask for, on the ground that her husband had left her only the trifling annual percentage of her own small portion, secured to her by the merest accident; indeed, by the merest acci-

dent, not lost to her through the late Rector himself, when a day or two before his death he had talked of the Funds rising, and proposed to sell out at a great advantage.

Therefore Mrs. Smythe had again painfully decided, that very day, on the evening of which Muggops had stepped down, to give up all thoughts in the direction of writing to her relations, the Nugents, at all. She had felt there was no choice for her now, but to try the boarding-school scheme, of which her legal friend had just begun to think highly. But here had this piece of good-fortune come, and the ticket-board on the corner elm was positively being clambered up to, in open morning, by Sarah herself with a hammer, on the steps of a shaky ladder which little Lizzy held with all her might below; while her elder sister Jane assisted slightly, using one hand in a garden glove, and standing at a somewhat supercilious distance from any risk of chips. Their brother Nugent, a tall handsome boy, almost a full-grown lad, his dark eyes bright with exercise, his crisply-curling brown hair still moist from a bathe, hurried in from the gate without noticing them; the young Ashburtons were outside, waiting, on the way to their day's studies at the vicarage, where the curate prepared them along with his boarders for Harrow School. As for Nugent, he had been at Harrow already, having joined a year before the Rector of Notley's death; but Mr. Webb the Hinchbridge curate had conceived a great belief in Nugent's "superior parts," and had asked Mrs. Smythe as a personal kindness to entrust him for a short time with Nugent's Greek and mathematics. And Nugent had graciously agreed, and was an extraordinary favourite of Mr. Webb's, and read with him after-hours in the higher branches. So he sprang in for his books, rather of a ponderous form as they were, suitably to Mr. Webb's tutorial character; and happening to be in unusually high spirits that fine May morning, cheered his mother considerably by the fact.

The parlour-window was open to the pleasant air, and she sat thinking over her needle-work near it, but Nugent would have dashed by again without notice, had not she called to him.

"The little fellows are behind time, mother," said he, hurriedly. "I haven't a moment. By the bye, though—the Ashburtons will be back from town this evening. The Squire himself, I mean, with Mrs. Ashburton and the young ladies. I s'pose they'll call on you before long?"

Mrs. Smythe's eyes rose involuntarily towards Sarah and the ticket-board, which that active damsel was slowly bringing down with a sage look of satisfaction. Nugent's eyes followed the glance, and for a moment he gloomed.

"I hope it's done with?" said he; not having been in at the interview with Mr. Muggops, nor yet chanced, it seemed, to hear of the result.

His mother was grave too; evading a direct answer, and evidently anxious to keep him cheerful. Whether the Ashburtons called soon, or not, she said, he would probably be often with *them*. He was *sure* to be there often, of course; being so much with the boys. Mr. Ashburton's tastes, besides, lay so much along with his own. Mr. Ashburton had shown such a disposition to like him, and Mr. Ashburton's society was really of that kind to be of advantage to him, especially for university objects; indeed with a view to the church.

Nugent looked round without answer, at Sarah, who by that time kept her trophy out of view, much in the same way as it had been obscured before by leaves: neither by her countenance nor by any remark betraying why it was being removed; in fact, assuming an indifferent expression. Little Lizzy's eyes sparkled, but she pursed up her mouth demurely and followed the train of Sarah; while, for Jane's part, she met her brother's look with an air half-pitying, half-confidential; and perhaps might have informed him as she retired,

somewhat primly, towards the house. But Nugent seemed to disdain asking, and after one more nod of acknowledgment to his mother, set his lips together, and walked off.

A great relief it was, for the present, to have got that arduous scheme of the boarding-school staved off; to have so much of her house as she retained, at all events, preserved to herself in its former quiet and seclusion, confining the educational task to her own two girls as yet. To think, too, that there might be hopes of Nugent's looking forward to Cambridge, with settled and definite views, contenting himself meanwhile with the good curate's tuitionary help, and the few objects of interest, the few occupations, the little society, that such a place as Hinchbridge furnished to a youth of his capabilities. Judging by Sarah's proceedings all that day, shut up with broom and pail to her own management in the end-wing, but evidently bustling, at times manifest with a duster against the windows—the trust-worthy maiden had determined to set all right, and make matters thoroughly comfortable. Whether the first tenant might stay or not, beyond the month stipulated, her exertions surely well deserved that he should become a permanent occupier: she seemed to have got notions of her own in her head, taking the entire affair into her own hands, and not letting much of it out to any one; even to little Lizzy, who, although brought in-doors to her geography, made a pretext of it to cast sly glances out of window. Really, to see occasional glimpses of Sarah through the vacant rooms, upstairs or downstairs, now amidst a mysterious cloud of dust, now sprinkling it down from a watering pan as if it were flower-beds, was interrupting to any kind of study. There she was, again, rubbing furiously; anon, she had climbed up, and was hammering, so loudly that the sound of it penetrated through the very noise of Jane's practising on the harpsichord, emphatic as that was in the fashionable "Battle of Prague." And Lizzy tittered

outright, with her chubby face apparently absorbed upon the globe beside her, lesson-book in hand, when Sarah's homely face in the working-cap, all besmeared till it was scarce to be recognized, presented itself suddenly in full sunshine opposite, like some positive hobgoblin making gestures within: so that the little girl had to be decidedly chidden, and made to move nearer her mother's work-table. That table was never close by windows, never inelegantly prominent where a visitor might pass,—at least where visitors might have done, at Notley Rectory; nor was it likely Mrs. Smythe was going to break through the habit now, for the sake of superintending Sarah's zeal, much less to pave the way for inquisitive observation of what Sarah had thus begun to save her from. Sarah had, in fact, made it at once perfectly and pleasantly conceivable to her mistress, how with her management and the offered concurrence of Miss Muggops at the tavern, setting aside the gentleman's own attendant, it might fairly be called a mere sub-tenancy which had been arranged. Not lodgings at all. No. Whereat Mrs. Smythe could not but feel grateful to Sarah Flake; struck by an impression that Sarah, since last night, had appeared more than commonly positive in her own ways, and taciturn, and formally deferential.

"Jane—Jane, my dear!" was her sudden ejaculation, at the apparently abrupt stopping of her elder pupil over the harpsichord, amidst a most triumphant execution of music which had been in vogue when Mrs. Smythe learned at a first-rate seminary,—“why do you stop in the middle of that piece? I have been noticing a want of time in your playing, all along—and the ‘Battle of Prague’ requires care.”

Jane started from a reverie of her own; which had lasted, however, for some minutes. “La!” exclaimed she, staring at the remark, “it was Haydn’s ‘Dying Christian,’ ma’m—I had finished it some time, besides. I declare I waited, thinking you engaged, mamma.”

The mother looked too conscious for Jane's quick black eyes to miss the circumstance ; and not far in her teens though Jane was, she had something so particularly clever about her, so early a turn for manners and for knowledge of the world, that Mrs. Smythe secretly entertained the hope of her making a good governess before very long ; with the best prospects of being eligible, when finished, to some noble family. Jane was mildly requested to go on, playing the more difficult pieces over again : indeed, for all the branches which she and little Lizzy had been obliged to leave off with their former governess, their mother had been delighted to find how competent she was herself. Some remnants of the Rector's ample library had been preserved, and with a view to keep advanced in that sort of knowledge, she had begun to plod through volumes of history he had plainly never used, to cut up the leaves of educational or moral publications he had not opened ; refreshing her early acquaintance with celebrated poets, and reading in standard authors less familiar to her. Her French was tolerable, she felt ; her Italian at least decent, if rubbed up and repaired ; then her music had been at any rate from first-class masters, and it was because of what the Rector, at least, considered her fine voice and style, that he had ordered that sumptuous harpsichord with the latest improvements from London ; which Mr. Price had insisted she should keep for this very purpose. Really, this home-teaching of Mrs. Smythe's was the reverse of a burden ; she liked it, and the delicious rural air came in the while, through the garden ; and it would have been obvious to the dullest stranger how utterly she was one of those mothers who are wrapt in their children, making up in them for something foregone before, measuring all else by them, caring for nought else if she kept them, putting off the world in preparing them for it, delighting in the youngest because longest secured to her. Little else of the Rectory seemed left, in truth ; except that large oil-portrait, in elaborate gilt frame, of

the placidly-important Rector himself, opposite the mantelpiece, above Jane's head, which bore a certain resemblance to him. To him, though older far than herself, portly, almost gross in spite of the painter, with a smug oiliness about the vulgar lips, and a volume spread pompously at one side, beneath one large hand with a great carbuncle ring on it—his widow might have been thought absolutely grateful still, if her eyes rested there by chance as she sat and sewed in silence. And if the world blamed him now, if the once-praised learning was apparently forgotten by others, and the excellences he had surely possessed were known to none but her—people seeming to hold his memory in no peculiar reverence since his death, even Mr. Price having once or twice betrayed a strange temper on the subject, and only avoided it afterwards by never mentioning his name, actually turning his chair from view of that portrait as it struck her—yet perhaps it brought up considerations that were all the more affecting, so as to have filled her eyes with tears had she allowed herself to gaze long that way. A firmer air of authority, therefore, suitable to the duty of lesson-time, marked Mrs. Smythe's features at any occasion for it. Though they were rather delicate for the purpose, if not a degree too youthful since that very morning, through Sarah's manner, or the sunshine, or something else that suggested good hopes.

"'Tis that noise puts me out," returned Jane again, stopping short this time amidst a crash of music which might have drowned most other disturbances. But Sarah was undoubtedly much nearer than before; above stairs, in fact, knocking determinedly on a very hollow place, which might, for all that could be said, have been the sudden indication to her of a concealed treasure.

"I know!" burst out little Lizzy, after a joint pause of curiosity, "it's the new passage-door between. She's nailing it—Sarah's fastened it up!"

"True," said their mother, regaining placidity. "Very

properly. There will be no need of communication, of course."

"Yes, he keeps his own valet, or a groom, or something," returned Jane, carelessly. "I wonder if he'll have a horse, or perhaps a carriage. He *must* be somebody. They say he is rich—immensely rich."

"Oh! and he'll give parties!" was the little girl's exclamation, as she clapped her hands together. "And he'll know us, mamma—he'll be sure to see us, you know, and ask you to balls, for there's plenty of room in the——"

"A mere whimsical old bachelor, child!" put in her sister disdainfully, "and such a common vulgar name—but if he stays as long as Sarah seems to expect, why, nobody knows what he might do, or what whim he might have. I know, if it were to be made immensely rich, mamma, I"—and Jane looked most significantly wise, with a glance of pity round the parlour furniture, which seemed almost to include the late Rector's own likeness.

Now, both at Notley and since coming to Hinchbridge, there were certain of the usual liabilities incident upon Mrs. Smythe's bereaved state, at the age left by a first marriage in very early life; nor had she escaped being occasionally reached by them for a time, in the shape of a cool consolation or two, some almost-direct advices of polite friendliness, and a few more vulgar inuendoes; till her scrupulous conduct had been enforced by the course of action at the Grange, now bearing fruit. There might be some consciousness of this in the flush of her cheek, the evident firmness of her lip, and the slight flash which so gentle an eye could yet give forth, as she put a decisive stop to Jane's volubility.

"What matters it, you foolish girl, you—*how* you would choose to act? Any silly behaviour whatever, recollect, Jane—in these circumstances—any appearance of curiosity, or listening for idle village gossip, or encou-

raging it in Sarah—must be avoided. I have great confidence in Sarah, when trusted to—and it is a position requiring the utmost delicacy. That is, were the endwing to be occupied for any time—besides, my dear, Hinchbridge rumours are not much worth, you ought to know.”

“Sarah has come out, and locked the outer door, mamma,” was Lizzy’s eager report; “she’s finished, I think—for she’s gone away round with the pail and things.”

“Very well, then—you are ready with your geography, I suppose, Lizzy?” said Mrs. Smythe. “Come here with your globe, and show me. Pray, Jane, take your French exercise—and—yes, love, point out the country from your book.” The little girl pointed it out boldly: it was a great country; no doubt by a coincidence making her mother start a little, and Jane look up once more.

“India! Hindostan. Ah? Well—the situation and boundaries?” With which the teacher took a severe air, regarding the pupil out of the book, intently. India had somehow been much in the domestic thoughts of late; owing to vague hints and secret conceptions on Nugent’s part. It was curious how well Lizzy could indicate everything, for all her recent idleness at the window; as if there had been hidden talk of it before, as if some one had helped to put her in a way of preparation about it. India, with the equator passing over it, like a great road round the world; bounded by wondrous lands, and by the ocean with the latest discoveries of the late Captain Cook; with gorgeous names in it still, of the Moguls, Golconda, Ceylon, the Juggernaut pagoda, Benares, celebrated for temples, Ganges by whose banks the widows burned themselves on piles. India, where Englishmen were now at war, making great conquests, earning extraordinary fame and vast fortunes—where Lizzy, too, was horribly aware that there were serpents, tigers, and naked idolators, all doubtful as to position, if, according to geographical appearance, they inclined rather

to stand on their heads, and be in the dark during day-time—but where Jane had explained that there were delightful palanquins to be carried in, great fans to keep away the heat, with slaves to use them, and diamonds and pearls that came in presents. She could understand all that; all about the elephants, also, and cockatoos: but could it be true, as Nugent had said, laughing, that there was a tree, the rupee-tree, where money grew?

"Nugent thinks so?" asked the mother, suddenly; repressing a look of sharp pain. "He said so, then—he talks to you, Lizzy, of what he hides from his mother! Perhaps with Jane, too?" And she looked inquiringly in Jane's direction.

"Yes, ma'am," confessed Jane without much reluctance; turning round on her seat, too, with open interest in the matter. "Nugent does. He cannot help it scarcely, you know, mamma, because 'tis so disagreeable to you."

"Oh! I could have told him—if he had only spoken—if he were but open with me yet!" broke out the mother, for a moment giving way to emotion,—“I could still tell him enough to stay these thoughts of his—these mad ideas and wishes! But *you* tell him, Jane—since his confidence is withheld from *me*—let him know that • of all rash, hopeless, frantic projects for leaving us, for setting aside the best expectations, for making us wretched here—India is the worst! I have reason—sharp and bitter reason—for it."

"Nugent wishes to grow rich, and come back and make us all happy," said Jane, looking away obstinately: though Lizzy, hanging her head confounded beside her globe, glanced up with a wistful side glance; and however commonplace might be Mrs. Smythe's general character, there was now strange force in her manner.

"Listen," she said, hastily. "I had an aunt with whom I lived when I was young, and her son had gone to India—an officer he was, and grew distinguished, and rich, powerful, almost a prince, with some Indian rajah.

Oh, I know India, Jane—I am quite acquainted with its lures—its dangers—its temptations—let Nugent understand that, not as if from me, though.” She had a curiously cunning expression, as she noticed how Jane saw her purpose.

“For she heard from him sometimes, in answer to many letters—we heard from him, I should have said, for I too wrote often, knowing him so well by the little miniature, taken just before he went—and by constant description, how handsome he had been, how spirited, and affectionate, and tenderly, piously brought up. My aunt was a good woman, of very strong mind, perhaps too commanding, and I thought her, to me, severe—but she loved us both. As for him, her whole heart had become treasured up in him. Yes, dear—he *did* send things, rich stuffs and precious things, often instead of letters—while she waited for him, actually desirous that he should not come too soon, as it was for good, she thought—finally—to settle and marry beside her. Suddenly, all at once——”

“He—he was killed!” burst out little Lizzy, breathlessly, hiding her face in her mother’s lap, where she had knelt down to listen.

“No—he came back,” continued Mrs. Smythe, with particular calmness. “But to his mother, when she had time to find out, so changed—so painfully changed, she said herself, for it was not *I* who felt it—that—that——”

“Sunburnt, perhaps, and yellow?” suggested Jane, tolerably placid at the idea. “Like Captain Norris, Mrs. Ashburton’s brother, who is coming down with them, the little girls say, to drill the county militia.”

Little Lizzy raised her head from its sheltering-place with extreme awe, and whispered, “Jane, don’t you know? They tattoo them. Sometimes they scalp them. Perhaps his nose was ——”

“Their tastes were become different,” resumed the mother, absorbed in her own thoughts, “their habits——

the things they could talk of, or recollect—their very creed. Yet how like each other in temper—their pride—their two faces, though his was dark and handsome, slowly settling together that they could not agree. Not that they quarrelled. But—only for this, he would have remained, I think. He was proud—proud, Jane—and—and so were we. We let him go quietly, back to India, where he is now.”

“Then he is alive,” exclaimed Jane, delightedly. “He is your own cousin, mamma—and he may come back. Of course he will.”

“I hope never again to see or hear of John Nugent,” said Mrs. Smythe, with resolute composure, “nor will he of me; our parting having at last been final.” She fixed a glance again on the late Rector’s portrait, that partook almost of reverence. “There is something to me particularly dreadful in India,” she added. “It seems to change men’s very natures—their sense of honour and truth, if not morals. One would have thought my cousin turned, there, to mistrust of me—to silent hatred, almost—because his mother left her small means to me, saying on her deathbed it was so very little to John’s wealth. But to have heard that mother at the same time, Jane—that was the thing—yearning, in spite of all her pride, all her hurt heart, towards John who was not by—who had oftener sent shawls and necklaces than letters. ‘Tis that you must tell Nugent—I will tell him!”

Little Lizzy sobbed. “So will I, mamma!” she faltered. “Yes, and Hinchbridge *isn’t* a hole I’m sure: isn’t there the river, and Hinchly Dell, and the Hall Woods with the birds all about in them, and Chelmstone Common, and ever so much more? We’ll take him walks. Over to Fern-acre, Jane, where the wild violets are? We’ll keep him.”

“‘Tis much more to the point, I fancy,” said Jane still superciliously, “that the militia are called out. The yeomanry are to review in a few days, too. Besides, the Ashburtons are coming back.” And at that vivid

recollection even Mrs. Smythe looked serious, while Lizzy clapped her hands in triumph.

"Stay, though," said their mother, reflecting a little: "better no opposition—no force. Do not say anything at all to Nugent on the subject, nor shall I. I have a plan of my own."

When Jane eagerly inquired what that was, her mother's look at her became wonderful for sagacity. "Perhaps I have changed my mind, Jane," she said. "No matter, I shall keep my own counsel." The same air of growing experience, as once or twice before: the same sudden expression of a fond, cunning instinct, simple enough to behold, nay, well-nigh piteous to a keener observer than she had.

The truth was, without concerning themselves with other people's affairs, the Smythes at the Grange had quite sufficient of their own: and when Sarah had managed all the dinner-matters, providing for the evening, getting herself ready to go up the way in tidy dress, with a basket, there was no special interest excited. The door had to be answered then from among themselves, if any one should chance to knock: Nugent was sometime to reappear: there was besides, certainly, for little Lizzy, the impressive thought that, as Sarah's deputy, she might have to open all at once for the strange gentleman, for Doctor Smith. But Sarah almost anticipated the fear by a nod of the head, with the remark that there was no fear for a day or two. She would be sure to be in *then*, herself. She went up by the "Blue Pig" back, and if she called in there, quietly, going or coming, perhaps in the dusk, for a private word with Miss Muggops, no one else knew. The landlord himself could not have told, if those two managers laid their heads together.

CHAPTER IV.

NEWS AT THE "PIG"—AND TO MUGGOPS.

A GOOD many days had passed over the village of Hinchbridge, and over the roof of the tavern at one end of it, without attracting any particular notice to the Grange; nay, the "Mercury" stage-coach had about twenty times passed to and fro, and the critical period of licence-week was close at hand with the fairest prospects for quiet renewal, and Sarah Flake, with her basket on her arm, had been frequently dropping in at Miss Emma's bar-closet: yet no symptom or sign, that had appeared to honest Joe Muggops, justified his giving much thought to the late piece of business. The fact was, Hinchbridge and he had other matters to think of, during those days; stirring matters, troubled rumours through the country, and local affairs of great importance besides.

News came by coach to Chelmstone, one afternoon, from town. Great public tidings, of course; such as nobody very well knew to communicate, when by the evening they trickled back to the "Deane Arms," then circulated through Hinchbridge; to dribble with a provoking contradictoriness in the end, though none the less relished, inside the "Blue Pig" kitchen-hearth.

The front-room was occupied, the upstairs-parlour in full possession, and all the energies of the bar-place consequently required, with the occasional help of Miss Gibbs, who had just stepped over the way; while the evening being rainy, threatening to be wet and very dark, the kitchen had early begun to gather its own social circle. Thither, before long, came shuffling in little old Dockett, the parish-clerk, to take his usual snug seat in the chimney-corner; and it seemed to everybody that Mr. Dockett's jealous self-importance on the score of office, a little moderated during the late singular intrusion, had for the last ten days or so been growing again, till that night it exceeded all former bounds. The seat was hastily vacated before him by the big, mild-faced con-

stable, who left him full space for dignity as well as comfort: nay, the whole talkative circle of Hinchbridge folks, mug or pipe in hand, pushed back their stools a little, or half-rose, at first sight of his snuff-coloured suit and black stockings; ceasing for the moment to smoke or quaff, and on the whole making a deferential pause. With the exception, certainly, of that pug-nosed, bald-headed, squat-built cobbler; who, chancing this time to be earlier come, only reclined the more at ease on the opposite settle—which had no wooden back to it after all—puffing out the more vigorously a cloud of smoke, and surveying Mr. Dockett calmly, with upturned coat-cuffs and shirt-sleeves that were not very clean, as usual. The fact was, that Hubbard the cobbler also had seemed to recover boldness these ten days, till that evening he looked sulky, if not openly pugnacious. Therefore there might be some reason for the parish-clerk's stiff attitude, after all respect had been paid him; while he slowly took off his three-cornered hat that had a sort of parson-like scoop behind, nearly lifting away his brown wig, and striving to overcome a wheezy cough which often seized him; then looked round carefully at the whole group, nodding more graciously to one or two in particular, observing the cobbler with a frown, and holding out his hand with impatience for that silver-glazed porringer, sacred as a vestry-tankard, which the kitchen-wench was conveying full to him, in haste.

No one spoke till old Dockett had blown aside the froth with deliberation, had gradually tasted the ale, and meditatively parted his lips again, looking straight up the chimney with a reflective seriousness; whether to identify the special tap, or, as the cobbler had profanely hinted before, to say grace for it, like an old church-chick as he was. "Well, Master Dockett, sir," said then the mild-faced constable, who was village-blacksmith besides; leaning anxiously forward and rubbing his large hands in each other towards the settle: "what

is them news, now, after all? If any man ought to know, it's yourself, I reckon!"

"Susan, a pipe," said the little clerk, sitting bolt upright with a peevish look: "a fresh pipe and tobacco, I say, girl!" And till he had shakily stuffed them together—getting a light a yard off, from the assiduous constable, which made him gasp and cough again—nobody ventured to speak but the cobbler, who said, "Aye, that's the quest'n—what's the news, say I!"

The parish-clerk sucked feebly at his pipe, without apparent heed to the inquiry. "Where's the landlord?" he said at last, glancing round in a pompous way. "What's come of Joseph Muggops, I'd like to know? This don't look like the master of the house, I should say!"

"He's about, Mister Dockett," said the constable; "he's about some'eres, sir—certainly. An't he, folks?"

"So he be"—"Seed un myself a bit agone"—"Mindin' parlour up there"—"Aye, old Joe's about, I warrant"—"A'll be in directly, Muster Dockett, when he know you're here"—so replied several neighbours in a breath. And accordingly, as the parish-clerk was that night so particularly high-and-mighty, Joe Muggops in his soft old hat and his shirt-sleeves, with apron on, was soon leaning against one arm of the chimney-settle in his wonted good-humour; tasting his own ale cordially to the health of Mr. Dockett, inclusive of the company round. Making up, rather, in short, for late doubts about him; though perhaps there might be a slight excess of zeal in his attentions, as if forced; he might seem uncommonly careful to keep matters smooth between opposite sides of the chimney, and to hold their talk close to the weather. The night looked to be so bad, he thought, that the grazier and his friend upstairs would most likely put up. So, young Jim, there (the little cow-boy who looked after the apology for a stable), needn't yoke their gig yet, but give the mare a feed

instead. Whereat, possibly, a thoughtful shade might have crossed for a moment over the manly flatness of the landlord's visage, at the parlour being once more occupied for a night; or a frown of recollection on his prominent brow might catch the old parish-clerk's notice as their eyes met, when Joe again wished Mr. Dockett's health, and covered his own features with the ale-mug. The latter surveyed him but primly as yet, and, letting the pipe sink from his lips in a slowly-observant manner, said "Thankye, landlord, thankye—much obliged, I'm sure. No news, though, from upstairs—hey? It's news we want to-night, it seems."

Muggops shook his head, for the grazier and his friend were particularly dull except on markets. The conversation down-stairs was dull too, as yet. "You're what we looks to, yourself, Mr. Dockett," he said, "for the news correct. You're at the founting, like, Mr. Dockett." And he got up a cheerful expression.

"Why, landlord," returned the parochial functionary, with a pointed manner at which Muggops winced in silence, "in place of one's bringin' news to the 'Pig,' of late, 'twas to you we'd got to come for 'em—with your fresh London papers every day!"

"Oh, come, Mr. Dockett, sir—dang it!" was the propitiatory answer, with a laugh and a soothing tone, "you've got me *there*, I own—but ye know pretty well as the 'Pig' an't had a older customer nor yourself—nor one he vallies equal! In the way o' business, though, look ye, a man can't help himself sometimes—wot's not agreeable, ye know, Mr. Dockett, an't always to be got rid on at once. Are it, sir?"

"Surely, surely, landlord," admitted the parish-clerk, somewhat mollified, and smoking on again. "So far I grant ye. But—why, one 'ardly knew the house at the time, you might say. An' even since they've left, one don't just know if the landlord's about, or not!"

"Nothin' but a little busy, Mr. Dockett," insisted Joe. "As for that t'other business, never was gladd—

to see the back of a thing. So-thank-me-Bob, its over !” continued he, with a cheerful slap on his thigh. “And here we are, all snug.” “Here we are, sir,” said the constable, approvingly : “it’s over.” “Your health again, Mr. Dockett,” added the landlord ; “Constable ; likewise—Tom Hubbard, there, also—the company round, here’s toward ye, gemmen all. Wot a night it’s goin’ to be outside, too, o’ rain ! Mr. Dockett, sir, you’ve the news, I’m sure on it—correct too. I see as much by your eye, I tell ye ! Come, sir.”

“Well,” at length vouchsafed the little old parish-clerk, “it’s nothin’ of imminent danger, on the whole—nothin’ by way o’ misrevolutionary effect, to my opinion, though some folks might so desire. A mere riot, after all. Sure to be put down forthwith. Nevertheless I had it on the best authority—the best authority, sir !” repeated he, raising the mug to his lips with studied calmness, and his eye towards the host, while everybody else stared. “On’y some of these wild Irish ’ave rose in rebellion. His reverence the Curate informed me not a hour ago, ’avin’ read it at the Grange this very afternoon, out of a paper fresh from Lunn’on, a-lying on Madam Smythe’s parlour table.”

“Oh ?” involuntarily ejaculated Muggops. “Madam Smythe’s ! Well, o’ course—they *do* happen to have a chance postich or so, at times.”

“Why, I thought,” put in the cobbler hastily, ceasing to puff his short cutty-pipe, with rather a chopfallen air for the moment, “I thought ’twas the French was agoin’ to do summat or other, ’twere said ?”

“The city of Dublin,” went on the parish-clerk, with extreme unconsciousness of the cobbler’s remark, “in a state of rebellion, and twenty thousand papists armed against the law and constitution. Han’t you heard of it before, then, Mr. Muggops ? But never fear, sir—they’ll be quelled and subdugated pretty shortly, I warrant ye. The’ll be hanging and quartering by next news—and ’ave all their heads cut off directly afterwards.” At these im-

perious words, which, to say truth, the little clerk delivered with an aspect of augmented security and importance, approaching to the despotic,—a shade of conviction fell somewhat depressingly upon the company. With one single exception, it seemed about to pass into obsequious approval.

“No they won’t though, Mr. Dockett,” said Hubbard the cobbler, plucking up a desperate spirit on the sudden. “Twenty thousan’ men an’t put down so quickly, once they’re up for rights and freedim—are they, Dick Cox?” But Dick, though suspected of being a crony of the cobbler’s on birding matters, as well as of sly poaching, only gave his head a vague shake. The parish-clerk utterly disregarded them both, while in his solely addressing himself to the landlord there appeared a certain disposition to triumph for past offence. “The military was fast collecting, said the Reverend Mr. Webb to me—so we needn’t be alarmed, he says—and as for the neighbourhood, here, between you and I, ye know, all disaffection are prepositerious in the extreme, for Sir Thomas at the head of the yeomanry, sir——”

“In course, in course, Mr. Dockett,” was Muggops’s eager response, “no danger, sir. Glad to hear it’s not the French, after all!”

“Come, then,” the cobbler boldly persisted, after a brief meditation, “what’s the militia to be called out for, Mr. Dockett? I’d like to know *that*, sir?” “And who said they were?” was the curt rejoinder, as Mr. Dockett granted his admission to the discourse; “who said they were?” It was only to bear up as stoutly as possible against oppression, that Tom Hubbard replied, “W’y, everybody—lots o’ folks, anyways. It’s commonly reported.” “Pooh, pooh! Folks say a deal of stuff, you needn’t tell me,” proceeded his parochial superior, using a manner of putting down which on that night appeared scarcely tolerable, even to the hearers; “if any one ought to know, I should think *I* ought.

Well, then, Thomas, they *ain't* to be, then. Come, now?" So there was a good deal of excuse felt for Hubbard when this patronizing way of the old clerk's was resorted to as usual, if he chose to enrage the cobbler, or to enter upon debate. And election-time being over, with licence-week understood as settled, the "Blue Pig" circle for a few minutes indulged in the rather perilous luxury of attention to their dispute.

"I tell ye what it is, Mister Parish-clerk, then," burst forth Tom Hubbard—after a tremendous puff of smoke, from which he thrust his turned-up nose with a defiance that made even Muggops grin; all being fair argument as yet,—“I doesn't believe a word of it—nor yer Hirishers either! What's the Grange to do with it, when I just come fro' Chelms't'n where the news was? What *I* hears is—an' I believes it firrum——It's old Boneypart as is made a *Hemperor* and *he's up again!*”

The effect produced by this affirmation, with the confident and joyous emphasis put upon it by Tom Hubbard, was for some moments as overwhelming as he could have desired. Half the company started almost to their feet at once, while the little parish-clerk's under jaw dropped, snapping his long pipe as he gazed and stared, and the constable looked over one shoulder uneasily toward the door; even the landlord unfolding his brawny arms with an ejaculation. It happened, too, that the wet night had become very blowy, for summer; the breeze sounded in the tops of the Grange trees close by, then rushed up along the open London road, round the corner, along the village, creaking the "Blue Pig" sign-board; finally, in that speechless interval, a fit of rain was driven against the end window, with a handful of damp leaves that made everybody's heart leap but the cobbler's. He relapsed as tranquilly against the bare whitewash, as if the said potentate had been his particular friend, and his own old coat could suffer injury no further.

"Dash it!" exclaimed the landlord; "No?" "Ee dunt act'ly say so, Tom!" gasped several in a breath: "When?—Where?—How? Is he, though?"

"Aye, by land and sea," said Hubbard, grimly knocking out the ashes of his black pipe on the hob, as he followed up his advantage. "With two hundred and fifty thousan' men, I'm told. You won't put *them* down so easy, will ye, Mr. Dockett, eh—let alone cut their heads off? He's the man for ye, I reckon! As soon as he lands, sir, w're's yer church, state, and irishtockercy as you talks on—that's wot I ask?"

"I won't hear this, I say, landlord!" said the old clerk, recovering himself through indignation. "What d'ye mean, Hubbard—are you in correspondence with the enemy, sirrah—are you a traitor or are ye not, sir? If so, let us understand it—make it clear at once, sir!"

"Well, the fact is," said Hubbard, coolly refilling his pipe, and deliberately lighting it again, "we've a lot to complain on (*puff, puff*)—you'll allow that at least, Mr. Dockett, sir? You've said as much afore, yerself." "And suppose I have, sir," agreed the other, with a lofty toleration; sustained by the wonted respect of the company for those two political speakers of the "Pig," whom knowledge and argument severally distinguished: "ye may go on—we'll allow it for the present." "It's a rotten systum, no doubt," said the cobbler, smoking on, "an' the worst o't is, we're (*puff*) afeared to speak. Sir (I means the *cheer*, there), it's no use a-sayin' we has liberty and freedim, an' all that, w'en (*piiff-puff*)—we has none. I'm not agoing for to speak gin'rally, on taxes or rates, nor (*piiff, puff, poff*) on 'baccy or even leather, which they're high enough, Lord knows! But I comes right home, here, to (*puff*) this here very village—why, not to mention a cock or two, as I can't be allowed to fight, if I keeps 'em,"—here the cobbler knowingly met the eye of Dick Cox—"well, then there's the game, as picks up a feller's cabbages or bit o' barley, but an't to be (*puff*) touched. No matter. At any rate, there's

Chipping Lane. Ah—ho, ho! Mr. Dockett! There's Chipping Lane, anyhow! An't there?"

At this thrust, singularly enough, an undeniable expression of assent, painful to behold, but impossible to repress, came over the countenance of old Dockett. At the same time a unanimous corroboration broke from the circle; as if in most cases, however, surprised from them, or doubtfully connected. "To be sure there are—Chipping Lane o' course—aye—no doubt—*Chipping Lane!*" The parish-clerk faltered, mumbled, and looked about uncomfortably. Muggops smothered a horse-laugh.

"Aha! And you're the man that knows about it, Mr. Dockett!" pursued Hubbard, with great glee. "The very head-quarters o' knowledge on the matter, too. I've heerd ye speak o'nt, sir. It's a shame, I say. *That's* comin' home, I fancy—there's a matter for ye, as is near at hand enough—not twenty yards off. It's common stock, eh? It's a parish business, I'd say—not to mention a village consarn! Wot made me think on't, be the wind just now—an' the pales must ha' got a good soaking, besides being rotten this half-dozen year, and the schoolboys getting through on the sly. Must ha' been up a goodish while, since the lane was closed by Sir Thomas's father? About how many year, Mr. Dockett, sir?"

"Never mind!" responded Mr. Dockett hastily. "Never mind that, just now, Tom. It's a dangerous per'od, this present. Another night, when it's quieter, we'll talk on't."

"Ah, but I do mind," persisted the cobbler. "I can't cut through Chipping Lane, if I want to, for Chelms'tn or Fernacre—nor I can't send my boy straight to school, by't. Why an't we got a school here, by the bye, in Hinchbridge? But what if I've a *right o' way* after all, Mr. Dockett? Ah—a right o' way! All owin', I say, to a bloated irristockracy and priestcraft as keeps the parish registers to them——"

"Sir—sirrah, you—you—it's a lie, cobbler!" shrieked out the parish-clerk furiously, coughing with agitation. "I'll—I'll—you low cobbling ignoramus—levelling atheistigle rascal—I'll have ye up, in the stocks—if it was argument, but ye don't argue! Why, an't it as plain as daylight that if ye reasoned the question——"

"Come, Tom," interposed the landlord, "we've had a'most all that afore, man; squash it! Own, now, ye just wanted for to lugg it all in again, neck and crop!" Hubbard grinned. "Well, wot's it to me if Boneypart *was* to invade this here country," he said, "when things is wot they is? I'd rather ought to give un a hand!"

"Seize him!" exclaimed old Dockett, starting up. "Constable, I charge ye—I give him in custody!"

"Order—order!" called out the constable, very gravely. Muggops wellnigh succeeded in turning matters with a laugh; warranting that if Boneypart came indeed, Tom would be the first to stand up and pitch into him. He referred to Mr. Dockett's self for corroboration. Then the constable, with a sly look, proceeded to vote Mr. Dockett into the chair; remarking that order must be preserved: a proposal seconded by Muggops himself, cheerfully taking off his own soft old hat, and rising. "Your seat's the cheer, Mr. Dockett," observed he, with added deference, "and here's your hat, sir. When you has your hat on, there, in that there settle, why, I'd like to see the man as won't keep orderly. Another measure o' the same old October, Sukey, to Mr. Dockett. Now for the matter o' the evenin'—politics be danged—any one got a song, or a tale, or a bit o' gossip—no sides in the 'Pig,' gemmen all. Your health, sir, once more."

The constrained silence, however, was not easy to break again; and it seemed the merely social resources of the "Blue Pig" had suffered some blow of late, for dulness rose through every pipe-puff, ale-gulp, and hand-rubbing motion towards the fire—every attempted joke of the constable, and every broken quaver of the hunting-

song by an old customer, to a tune which had formerly appeared jovial, but now doleful. A very unsatisfactory chorus was drawn to the frequent declaration, that "this day a stag must die!"—and as for asking any one to troll forth, in present circumstances, "It's my deloight, of a shoiny noight, in the season off the yeear!"—really it would not have done; seeing how uncomfortable it must make things for Dick Cox, who sat there, looking more demure than usual before Mr. Dockett; as also for that downcast neighbour of his, Simon Gray. All of a sudden, in fact, Dick Cox rose up in haste, as if it were late to go home so far, and extracting the due coppers from under his smock-frock, for Sukey at the back dresser, nudged Simon with a remark about the road; so that they both bade good-night and hurried out, though the wind and rain seemed at the worst, leaving an additional damp behind.

"A dickens-bad night!" said some one wisely, after the door had shut it out; and raised a feeble titter at the statement. "Bad road for 'em, too—unless they'd some short cut," added Tom Hubbard, more sententially; to which the constable retorted, nodding at him, "Strikes me, Tom, they'd a mind to look, after wot you said, how them pales be standin't out yet—and I shouldn't wonder, either, if Dick was the man to lend t'wind a shoulder or so?" "Come, come," said the landlord, looking to old Dockett again: "an' at any rate, if tales be true—though I'm not a 'Inchbridge man myself—why, shut or open, there's few 'Inchbridge folks would risk that 'ere lane! Would they, sir?" Mr. Dockett shook his head portentously, but was in no key to give the reason; nor was any ghostly narrative to be then extracted from him, which might have brightened matters up. Owing to which, a particularly dull man in the company, who often tried to get in his word, and was deaf besides, at last succeeded.

"They say old Redford the tanner, at Chelmsstone, 's broke," said he, abruptly.

"That's an old story, George!" laughed out Muggops. "I'm before ye there, then—for I hear Mayor Singleton, as the tannery belongs to, o'course, don't mean to let poor Redford have it again."

"Certainly not, certainly not," responded the parish-clerk, becoming excessively gracious. "Not likely. He ain't got a friend at court with the Rector, and the Rector's a great deal, I can tell ye, to the matter, with the Mayor and Sir Thomas. Now, I s'pose you may fancy our worthy Curate, here, be nothin' of the kind—but ye're mistaken." "Far from it—far from it, Mr. Dockett, sir," returned the host, with emphasis; "Quite contrary—I think a deal o' Mr. Webb, though he mayn't know it!"

"He've the Squire's ear at any rate," was the reply: "And I can tell ye, Joseph Muggops, there's some one stood your friend pretty hard with the Curate, not a day past either! He may be short-sighted a little, may the Reverend Adam Webb, sir—but of a Sunday when he've his glasses, he couldn't help noticin' the 'Blue Pig' pew—who was in't, and who *not*—couldn't help it, landlord!" Again Muggops reddened. "Well, it's over," repeated he, briefly: "I can't abear them dissenters, Mr. Dockett—never could. Wot's more, sir, that were the wery reason, now it's mentioned—w'y I cleared 'em out. Split on it, like—and gived warning that moment. No dissenters for the 'Pig!'"

"Dissenters be at Chelms't'n, a'ready," put in the deaf man, irrelevantly. "Down a back lane." "Ah, by Redford's tannery," said the constable; "where the Mayor, I warrant ye, wouldn't let 'em spread much. Shouldn't wonder if he took whole premises into his own brewery." "That he won't then," the cobbler answered, "for the tannery's let last week, on a lease too. It's to be dye-works, or summat for a new man. I seed 'em at it this afternoon, myself, a-settin' things to rights." *Who* had got it was now the general inquiry. Tom Hubbard could tell that too, taking a trade-interest in

tanneries, and having chanced to fall in with the very person who could inform him why the tannery-gate was closed ; namely, Price of Notley's young man, Gimble, as he had walked out of a side-door to the well-known yellow gig. It was nothing particular, however : only Price had managed to get the lease from Mayor Singleton, election matters being over, at a long rent, for some rich Lunn'on man. His name ?—why, nothing to speak of. But Smith was the name.

To the company at large, what a dissatisfying general sound, indeed, had the name of Smith ! The constable's name was Smith, and a smith he was to trade, as he remarked jocosely. It was respectable, at any rate, old Mr. Dockett could say—when genuine, only when genuine : and once more he pointedly eyed the landlord. Then Tom Hubbard could persist in putting in, that there were lots of dissenters by that name—and after all, who knew but old Brewer Singleton might not be able to keep Chelms't'n so close as he had done. But within the secret soul of Joe Muggops it roused a startling echo again ; at which he felt half ashamed as he carefully saw the little parish-clerk to the door, helping him to his comforter and umbrella ; for it was a Saturday night, and still wet and blowy. “ Harkye, landlord,” were the last confidential words to him, too, in his own porch, “ I may say, the ‘ Pig’s ’ safe again. Tomorrow’s Sunday, o’ course, but after Monday, it’s snug, Joseph. Stiffish business this time, though, my good man ! Stiffish business. Good night.” And Mr. Dockett, more primly than of old, withdrew.

For a minute Joe Muggops looked along after him, the wind being up so as to dilate his capacious lungs in a stirring way ; but much more for the sound of wheels that came from Chelmsstone way, towards him, past where the turn to Chipping Lane was visible. The thought of Chipping Lane also excited him, but a damp was on his spirits, and he hastened in at a fresh call from the graziers upstairs. As he came down to the

bar again, with quartern-pots in hand, he heard the wheels coming on, though it had struck him they had stopped, oddly enough, near about the closed-up end of that lane. "Dang it!" exclaimed he, suddenly; "it's pulling up *here*, though! You young Jim, there, where are ye?—run out and see, sirrah! Cuss me! Look sharp!"

The boy went out, and soon hurried back to him, on the staircase towards the up-parlour. "It was a one-horse chay from Chelms'tn, no further off—mun ha' come by the 'Deane Arms,' too—but the driver wanted it put up all night—would take no denial either—only wanted a pot o' summat for hisself, and a pipe, and a heat at the fire, being further bound." "Can't put up a 'oss this blessed night, ye know, boy," answered Muggops hastily, "if it was the Flyin' Fish's self from Epsom—can't do it. Sca'ce room for a donkey, so much!" "A' won't be told, though," insisted Jim, scratching his cropped head: "goes on main cocky, like—haxin' for the land'rd as a'd got a right to. Summow thinks I knew the v'ice, though its croaked screechin' at me—an' soa muggled up 'e be with neckerchers an' cloaks, as a cove can't know un."

"Who's the feller—wot's his name, young stupid?" said Muggops, angrily, though an odd idea crept uneasily on his mind; "Hask him, cau't ye!"

"Don't need—he's been an' hallooed it inter me," replied Jim again, "as soon's he got down. It's Bruters, he says I'm to tell yer. Ah!—*Brutehouse*. Best see un 'arself, measter, I reckon."

A quivering consciousness fell upon Joe Muggops like a thunderbolt. "Put him up, Jim," said he, hoarsely. "Keep him in the stable a bit, till I'm down."

"Put un up!—why, he's a-unyokin' an' puttin'-up, he is, hisself," was the conclusive answer. And Mr. Muggops gave the quartern-pots at once into the hands of Jim, while he hastened in person to the stable. The chaise, a glistening new chaise of the yellowest colour,

was already in by the back, unyoked, with shafts turned up toward the court-wall; the horse, a sleek stout beast of a light chestnut hue, in harness shining to the lanthorn, was being disposed of as best might be, in the remaining stall: as for the diminutive figure of the lanthorn-holder, in a great rain-cape and coachman's belcher, with his dripping hat over his brow, he might certainly have deceived a common eye; but to Muggops there was something about that drab coat-skirt, those knock-kneed brown gaiters, and the jerk of that sharp elbow, quite unmistakable. "Lord bless us! why, Sol—Master Sol!" he ejaculated; lending a stronger hand, at the same time, to help with the horse.

Master Sol, as it was no other than he, glanced at him very ungraciously indeed. "Ah. One 'd think one wasn't expected, though," said he, in a snappish style.

"Well—why. Expected!" was the faltering response.

"Aye, expected, I said. What the devil! An't that plain English?" said the man snarling at him. "Never mind. I can put a thing or two together. Perhaps quarter-sessions an't over yet? The company mayn't be just gone, which wouldn't suit *me*, either—as I'm not companyish inclined at present. Besides, it's against my orders to cause anything awkward. I'll take a pot and pipe here, by myself—the pipe 'll be enough, in fact—nothing more—don't put yourself about, landlord. And then be jogging, of course."

"Jogging?" repeated the landlord, with a sort of faintness coming over him. "Then be jogging!" As it was, the kitchen-company had been dropping away, and a peep from the back showed no one now but Sue, nodding towards the heaped fire-place and her night-kettle, with the black cat opposite on Mr. Dockett's seat: so that they could easily enter.

"Mighty prophet! Either you or I are precious dull to-night, Mr. Muckup!" protested his unaccountable visitor, moving inwards, however. "To be sure. Off,

down the way. I know it well enough, I hope. And the Governor don't keep late hours, nor this Madam Smythe either, I fancy. I haven't got the latch-key yet, not having arrived till now." The truth had scarcely begun to dawn as yet upon his host; till Emma looked in from the bar-place, after parting from Miss Gibbs at the front porch, and betrayed no surprise at sight of Solomon, however slight her salutation to him ere she retired. He stared from her, back to her father, with the ale-pot at his lips; then set it down suddenly, to take one of his sputtering fits of laughter, more like the sneeze of a cat than aught else which his host knew of.

"Possible! Possible is't, landlord!—He—he! he! Then he an't been seen about, all this time—nor heard of—even through Miss Muggob! Or—ho! ho! Sairey, through down there? *Well!* What safe creatures are females, to be sure! Near a week before me, he's been. Writing letters, perhaps, or arrangin' his chemicals and curiosities—his books and so on? Holy Moses! Didn't you hear a word of him after all?—he *must* have kept quiet, though!"

Muggops vehemently slapped his great fist upon his brawny thigh, but was silent.

"He *can* when he wants," pursued the other, more gravely. "And he's got business this time, at any rate. Most likely waiting for the chaise, to take him about. I drove it from Chichester all the way, where 'twas made, through Chelmsstone, and had a look of our new works, that were got so cleverly from the old brewing Mayor. Wouldn't been ours, if he'd suspected who 'twas—the oppressive old hunks. Was a tanwork, it seems—but we've contrived to get it. For a friend of ours—to dye in. Ho! ho! To *dye* in, Muggubs, my boy—but the'll be life, there, I suspect in a little, when *he's* about it? Eh? There's a little meeting-house, a sort of tabernacle—I'd rather say a tent, or a pig-shed, close by, crammed in for some paltry little half-starved Methodist preacher. Won't the fellow look up before

long, and spout. *He's* of the persuasion, you know—himself."

"Blow me—blow me!" emphatically muttered the landlord. "W'ere's my head *been*?"

"I'm to be sort of overlooker at the dyery," continued Mr. Solomon, cackling again. "But in a livery—he! he!" and he nudged the host. "For he'll be often over, I warrant. Jupiter! in style, too. The bailiff and Sir Tummas won't dream for a while of looking inside the chaise—then as for the odium and jealousy, you know, it won't fall on the 'Pig,' here. Whatever it is, it'll come on this Grangery down the way—and these Smythes. Well—we may be slow o' dying, but it's more in our line. I've a notion of it, landlord. I could keep a diary o' queer things I've seen. We'll turn out some new colours, in time, I fancy—more than buff or blue. Come, though—must be jogging, as I said. See us down the way, eh, for old acquaintance?" And his late host, throwing off some downcast feeling, very cordially acquiesced in the proposal.

"Mare's your own, too, I s'pose?" said Muggops, as he saw Solomon close by the Grange gate. "I should think so," was the answer. "Jockeyed for her, dealt, higgled, and bargained her, myself. Mind that boy tends her properly—and I'll see her groomed the first thing every morning before breakfast." "Afore I sleep this night," said the landlord, solemnly, "she'll be rubbed down and fed—like a Christian. The'll be no stir to-morrow, in course—it's Sunday. Be at church, I s'pose? Hinchbridge?"

"Not he—he's a dissenter, I told ye. No fear. If it's to Chelmsstone, I'll drive him, no doubt—and they won't know me up on the dickey at first, I should say—nor even while I'm kicking my heels outside the tabernacle, till it's over. I'll be looking into our new dyery, close by, and thinking. Thinking, Gummox, my man. Thinking on public life, but quite private,

We're goin' to be private, you know, as long as we're at the Grangery here, and I've a notion I may turn hermit, yet. Shouldn't wonder if I even settled down. Owing to Sairey." There might have been a jolly humour to Mr. Muggops, in the gleam of that one black eye which Solomon turned to him from the shade; but the bleared steadiness of the other optic, somehow, always threw a kind of side-slur on the man's wit, and the landlord felt least comfortable with him when he joked.

"And welcome, too," retorted the latter, gruffly. "By the bye, now I think on't, wot made ye pull up at Chipping Lane to-night? Didn't take the trespass-board for our sign, did ye?"

"Not likely," was the still sharper reply, "but I might have done, for I caught a customer's voice or two inside—I think I could name 'em for ye, landlord—rather merry and boisterous, helping the wind to bluster about old Sir Tom's pales—rattling on 'em, too, it struck me, for more liquor. Wouldn't stay, though, for an acquaintance! So on I came, of course, thinking it fancy. Perhaps a ghost—the ghost that the bailiff's people tried to get up, there, of somebody that never was murdered in it. A sort of extra gamekeeper, as 'twere—hey?" His hearer laughed, though rather uneasily; nor was it anything but the coolest commonplace with his companion. "What was strangest," added he, "half of the pales were blown flat down, the rest just going crash when I came up. But the wind lulled at sight o' me, and as for my voice, it was a miracle. Not a leaf stirring, you'd have thought. I could have driven right through, but forgot to mention it. Never mind, though—I see it vexes ye, Joe! If it's any concern of yours, I'm secret—for all I know, it's a vision. Something about right-of-way, I've heard?"

"Vision! *Blast* it!" groaned Muggops, turning from a sudden survey of him. "No—I believe it.

Cuss that gabbling cobbler and them two fellers, that Dick—hem—that's to say, if *you* didn't just lend them a hand yourself, Master Solomon. 'Twas your sort o' talk, anyhow, had set Tom Hubbard so agog about it!"

"No? No! You don't say so, landlord! Maybe, though," said Solomon, pulling up his livery collar with a self-complacent air.

"All 'Inchbridge 'll see it to-morrow, goin' to church," continued Muggops, irritated. "Sloane and Sir Thomas 'll be up afore on Monday. It's a plan agin me—a right-down plan. Amongst ye, somehow, I'm bein' reg'lar went an' Jewed! Hang ye!" They were under the deep dusk of the trees by the Grange wall, and all at once the puny-looking little groom made a spring out of it at his companion, with a grind of his teeth and a hiss like a trodden adder, but checked himself at the start it caused.

"Come, none o' that," said he, slowly unruffling and uncoiling, as it were. "Better not provoke me, Joe Muggops. I'm no enemy of yours, man, if I don't just pretend to be fond. If there's any one got a plan, it's not mine—and I don't know it—and I don't think it's against *you*. As for you and your Chipping Lane, you may chip it to bits, down to the fire below, for what I care—aye, and all Hinchbridge to boot. Good night."

He turned in with a jerk to the side-wicket of the Grange; while Muggops looked after him confused, then hastened up the path. He took a few cautious strides along the village before he sought his own door, and came back there with greater caution still, pondering the ravages of the weather. "Wot a blustrious night, to be sure!" he remarked to Emma in her bar-room. "Shouldn't be surprised if it did mischief, more perticklerly it'll be heard o' at sea. Oh, blow me, though, Hemmar! you *ought* to mentioned he was come back—the Doctor, I mean, down at the Grange!

Near a week, he's been. And I hope you must ha' knowed it?"

"I should hope so, father—why, didn't *you*?" rejoined Emma Muggops. "I thought, of course, father, if you wanted it managed quiet, you'd your reasons—and the quieter the better. Everything supplied has been prime quality. But la! it no more entered my 'ead you hadn't heard from Sarah, I declare, than a broomstick!"

Wherewith Miss Muggops seemed a little inclined to toss that smart head of hers, and to smirk superior wisdom, whether filial or merely female.

CHAPTER V.

DOWN AT THE GRANGE.

THE manner of the lodger's arrival at the Grange had been nothing at all extraordinary; just as was arranged, in fact, and understood and expected between Emma Muggops and Sarah Flake. Not that either of them knew, of course, of Mr. Muggops's cunning design to bring him back to the "Pig" when all was smooth; nor of the ambitious prospects, the bold and extensive scheme which might thereupon depend, secretly impending such changes to Hinchbridge, as made the publican quake when thus reminded of them. Their vague outline was all defined again by this punctual adherence to its conditions; there was a terrible systematic way of keeping his word about the so-called Doctor Smith, rendered more emphatic by these signs of further action through Solomon. None the less because Solomon came up in a day or two with the money advanced to the Grange people, showing a business-like care in his master, to which their seeming occupation with the Chelmsstone dye-work only gave a stronger shade. Whenever that dye-work should be found by the Hall folks to have got

into those hands, what would be the wrath of Bailiff Sloane—what the inquiries of his hangers-on! It was but a step, already taken, to the universal commotion—"the regular shindy," as Joseph considered it—whither every pot of beer from the bar down the Grange way, every baked joint in Sarah's hands, every tobacco-pipe taken away by Solomon, or each bottle he conveyed for the old gentleman's use, was surely leading. Nay, the month was more than half out, and even when the tavern licence was safely renewed from the magisterial bench, Muggops remembered that the lease was still to get again; from the less stringent source, no doubt, of Squire Ashburton's private capacity. He had great internal exercises regarding the point, whether as the Doctor's claim for re-admission approached, he might not yet stave off the crisis for another month. But never now entertaining the thought of resistance to the Doctor, whose power he felt thrown round him, with that one eye of Sol's to notice the least slip of the net, Joe Muggops made the best of it. His nights were restless, his gloomy dreams as of a fish in the water, still but captured, or of being heavily backed to fight when out of training; no professional traditions having reached him, of how certain ancient gladiators were entangled to destruction, the amphitheatre looking on. By day he remained aware that the contest would be of a mental nature, tending to politics; and, conscious which side he must take, knew that it would be idle to keep a horse and enter the yeomanry corps.

So far as the Smythes were concerned, the tenant of the end-wing had begun occupation in the most natural way possible, and continued it with no obtrusive or particularly eccentric behaviour. A letter or two for him, with the Grange address, having been there previously delivered by post, in the precise mode that was to be supposed, there had followed some luggage by carrier's waggon, just as was suitable, neither too much nor the reverse; the carrier having no other goods to deliver at

Hinchbridge, and so keeping on below the village for Chelmstone. When the owner of the property appeared, the day after, it was quietly enough, indeed, and by himself; yet in broad afternoon daylight, having merely left the stage-coach at the turnpike, as was most direct for the spot, with a small travelling-bag and a silk umbrella. He had been quite expected by Sarah, who no sooner heard the front-gate that afternoon than she was at the house door, almost saving him the trouble of knocking there: nevertheless, Mrs. Smythe, from her own front window, could not help seeing the Doctor plainly, nor he her; while little Lizzy, from the garden-side, could not of course resist one peep, as he was conducted round to his own special entrance; and Jane was in the garden itself, to her own considerable annoyance, without hat or gloves, filling a basket with early strawberries. A most satisfactory appearance he had presented to both the first; a disappointing effect to Lizzy, who thenceforth laid aside all concern about him; in Miss Jane's eyes, just what was to be expected. All according to the average course of such incidents, in fact: and in the same manner had Sarah provided a fire, and was not long in making ready a dish of tea, intimating that any attendance required was at his service, till his own servant arrived. Which, Doctor Smith had briefly stated, might not be for a day or two, perhaps longer; but he was an old bachelor, accustomed to do for himself. He had inclined, she admitted, to be rather crusty. Yet notwithstanding, she had perceived that he did not take off a large outer-neckerchief, and his voice was husky, the afternoon being damp; so that, Sarah being by no means easily put down, and really anxious for him, she had drawn from him the cross answer that he was liable to sore throats, and did not mind them. Whereupon Sarah had withdrawn, but straightway returned with a piece of flannel and a pot of black-currant jam, her own manufacture from that very garden last year; and would have gone the length of proposing to

assist in administering them in the right method, the gentleman's age considered—if not her own, or her style of countenance—only she had been deterred by his choleric complexion, with something of obstinacy about his expression, not to say of temper in his eye. To tell the truth, as she allowed it to Miss Jane in private, when the young lady lingered a little longer that night in the kitchen for her bedroom jug of hot water—the old gentleman was not much to look at, nor particular pleasant to attend. And when she had gone round, before dark, to see if anything was wanted more, he made no more answer than a stock-fish ; being got to bed, and the door fast. No wonder, perhaps, for very husky he was.

Everything as might have been looked for, since, too. He was confined to bed the first day, as he ought to have been ; the unthankful old character that he was, coming down in the evening to boil a coffee-pot and go up again, as if Sarah had not a latch-key to let her in for tidying things. For days after, he did not leave the house ; then set himself about arranging papers, odd-looking articles and eases, with a few old books not worth twopence ; or took a walk through the fields ; not seeming as if he knew what a garden was, nor the pleasure of fastening so much as a honeysuckle at his windows, though he brought back plants to dry, and stuck up butterflies on pins. On the Sunday he kept in, and read a book, and began to stretch himself and yawn, being scarcely well yet ; till a letter or two came again, that might have some part in freshening him up, for he got impatient about his man. Then when the man all at once appeared, with a horse and chaise provided, too, up the way at Muggops's, he could drive out when he chose ; and he must have gone to church, of course, at Chelmsstone. All quite regular, and according to Sarah's own heart, fearing he might otherwise have got tired of it ; especially satisfactory, when it turned out that there was business for him to look after in the town, where he

was now going every day, with workmen to oversee there, and a manager of it who sent messages to him; a smart young manager from Chichester, as the latter himself was not too close to let Sarah know one morning, when he waited for the Doctor in person. What with the serving-man, the horse and chaise, the business, and the manager, Doctor Smith rose to a place in her estimation which was enhanced every day, as the month drew rapidly to a close; nay, there was one thing about his personal habits that secured her esteem. Sober as might be his dress, he was particular about his linen; which had ruffles in the breast, conducing highly to set off a plain appearance, still more denoting the speedy certainty of a crisis. For no one in Hinchbridge could get up laundry-work to match it, she felt, like Sarah herself: and she gave a practical demonstration of it in good time to the man Solomon, that doubtless weighed with him before his master, in producing the triumphant result. Something, too, there might be in the effect of certain ominous discoveries by the Hall folks at Chelmsstone, on the mind of Joseph Muggops up the way; though as yet totally unheard-of at the Grange. Since that troubled neighbour, on the very last evening, confidentially accompanied the Doctor's man down the footpath, talking with him in accents of subdued earnestness; and next morning early, when Sarah felt still doubtful, Mr. Solomon walked right into her kitchen before breakfast-time, ere he left to groom his mare at the "Pig." There was an ambiguous expression in that man's countenance she did not yet quite understand, however agreeable his manners toward her were growing; indeed, for a minute or two, she could have fancied he trifled with her suspense, remarking on the brightness of her saucepan-lids and her white table-linen, with one eye fixed on her, the other wandering round, in a way which was idle, to say the least of it. Besides, if he meant a compliment, she was usually at that hour a great contrast to her own work, and the cleaner things

grew, the less so appeared Sarah, even herself being judge; nor was it what she liked, to have visits of a morning. But he finished sharply by depositing a packet on the dresser; which was, he said, the next month's rent: and as he hurried away at a sound of the Doctor's bedroom window, she really could have blessed them both.

Doctor Smith ceased for the present, in fact, to be the least burden on her mind; while as for the mistress, it might have been said, she took fresh heart from it for everything else, Nugent above all included; and he, with his sisters, were grown quite indifferent about the matter. Plenty of occupation they had, in the new stir about the village through Squire Ashburton's return from town, with Mrs. Ashburton and the young ladies in the fresh fashions. And it was a much more exciting affair, when one fine forenoon there came Jane, breathless from the garden wall, to say that Mr. Ashburton was coming up the lane; limping, of course, as usual, but accompanied by Mrs. Ashburton and the two eldest daughters, dressed to visit.

The Ashburtons actually called. They came in, ushered stoutly by Sarah to the empty sitting-room, where all was in wonderful order, considering. Mrs. Smythe, without the delay that would have followed from most people so situated, entered to them gently, in simple readiness of toilet, on the whole at ease, quietly taking up the conversation. And if aught had been needed to take off some awkwardness from a first visit, by previous acquaintances, after a rather considerable period of her residence at Hinchbridge, it was fully supplied by Mrs. Ashburton's perfect manners; for that lady was a woman of the world, despite her country life, and none the less because she did not seem so, smiling a gracious good-humour, talking much, appearing frank indeed beside the half-embarrassed Squire, with his shy glance at the Rector's portrait, and his hasty broaching of public topics then. She led off at a touch or two

from the subdued personal tone that at first befitted them, to lighter subjects of the day, on which local topics could strike in ; and as for family matters, she was herself a family woman, a large, fair matron of most prolific quality, so that her conversation ran generally into that vein, and little domestic interchanges of experience came quite natural to her, throwing back for the time a certain complacent consciousness of country blood and station, that rustled behind like her scarf of peach-coloured satin against the back of the chair. She was particularly friendly with Mrs. Smythe, on the occasion, and almost left the Squire excluded from such discourse, near his two daughters at a window in the background ; nor was it surprising if she betrayed rather a vague notion as to the number of Mrs. Smythe's family, when Jane and Lizzy came in dressed for view. Mrs. Ashburton used an eye-glass when at any distance, seeming to receive small persons close at hand, when she let it fall, with a degree of peering uncertainty, as if they dropped from a mist, or were the first of a procession : more especially when, after curtsying formally like Jane, they marched straight up to her like little Lizzy, petted into confidence by her late father, and put out a chubby hand to be shaken, looking up with wide grey eyes.

Mrs. Ashburton took it with a finger or two, mumbling some hasty compliment as she let it go ; at which Lizzy answered, " Quite well, I thank you, ma'am," and walked duly on to the Squire. There were already seven young Ashburtons on the whole, with no unlikely prospects of more to come ; a thing that perhaps rendered natural Mrs. Ashburton's apparent expectations when the door opened again, suddenly admitting Sarah with a salver and glasses, cake and wine, not to be outdone in her sense of what etiquette required ; though by her prompt change to a clean cap and a face shining with soap, the latter had not been so far disguised as to seem new. It would have been more pleasant if Mrs. Ash-

burton had fairly laughed, than to recoil so, from the identifying of Sarah with her previous shadowy semblance in the passage; or if, like her husband, she had good-humouredly nodded at the protrusion of the salver before her eyes, with some such remark as his, about preference for a glass of water that hot day, and consequent allusions for Mrs. Smythe's behoof, regarding the present summer weather. Mr. Ashburton had the gentler, shyer manner of one less practised in society than refined by somewhat bookish habits, which lameness from youth had forced upon him; he shook hands with Jane, and, patting little Lizzy on the head, drew from her various fruits of acquirement, while the elder girls renewed their acquaintance in the window-corner. A tall, personable man, finely-featured, who but for that slight flaw in an ankle-joint, might have loved field-sports and have been that day out with Sir Thomas Deane, drilling the yeomanry on Chelmstone common; yet now leant back half-smiling, half-resting from the walk, with a rather delicate cast of countenance and a dreamy languor over it, joining now in the ladies' talk, now listening to the young folks. Nevertheless, the Squire was singularly on the alert as to public affairs, forgetting all else when they at all were glanced at; nay, showing an interest in these, which led him ever and anon to bring them in. The Squire was in his politics by no means undecided; his principles were firmly loyal at all times, and that day constitutional beyond their wont, in support of His Majesty's ministry. He was even warlike, when he considered the state of the Continent at that moment; not so much that the yeomanry drill excited his regrets, at thought of inability to share it, as that he confessed to Mrs. Smythe his wonder at a factious Opposition or a party who clung to thoughts of peace, during the present juncture. In short, the Squire was, upon deliberate principle, a Tory, an admirer of the late illustrious Dr. Johnson, a friendly neighbour of Sir Thomas's, if not so locally zealous on the "Blue" side,

nor inclined to become conspicuous in a field-officer's hat and blue uniform. And mechanically taking up a newspaper that lay on a side-table near him, he had been glancing over it from time to time, till at last he had started and become indignant.

"This must have been penned," exclaimed the Squire, suddenly, "by a recreant indeed! Retrenchment, forsooth—national debt—hum—amicable adjustment—non-interference—rights of the people—liberal and cosmopolitan spirit—grand commanding genius of Napoleon! Ah! At this crisis, too! Most intolerable. Ha! The 'True Briton'—I thought as much!" He flung down the news-sheet again, contemptuously. "You surely cannot be aware, my dear madam," he said, turning with milder emphasis to Mrs. Smythe, "of the well-understood character of that print, there. Not so much, of course, for anything dangerous to mature readers—who probably skip the politics for the news—but for servants—for good folks in the village, to whom it might find its way! It is actually, I assure you, a most virulent assailant—however insidiously—*of the Church.*"

There was no need of assurances from the Rector's widow, seeing the surprise and alarm expressed by her face, to convince the Squire how unaware she had been of the fact. The newspaper was merely a stray one, among others occasionally brought there through Sarah, an attached and worthy creature; who, her mistress believed, was no reader. She herself scarce looked at them. She was pretty sure, however, that they were not always the same paper—odd numbers, in fact—lent by various neighbours, or come into Sarah's hands when thrown aside. Still, she would take care henceforth.

"To young, unformed minds of capacity," said Mr. Ashburton, gently, "there might otherwise be some hazard. The greater the capacity, to tell the truth, the greater the risk—and it must be owned that there is a speciousness, an occasional speciousness, and a lure of

false rhetoric, in these bold paradoxes. To any young, unformed mind of capacity, that is, my dear madam, a generous youth of parts and spirits, but without—exactly—a—a—I mean the requisite experience——”

He had thus hesitated and stopped, probably, because of a slight look from Mrs. Ashburton, that would have confidentially frowned him from a delicate point. Yet the Squire, conscious of Mrs. Smythe's eager notice, only turned it, perhaps, with a nicer delicacy, from the question of Nugent's prospects to his personal qualities.

“A young gentleman of the very highest promise, our young friend Nugent,” resumed he, plunging into the subject at heart. “He has been so associated with my own boys, under our worthy curate's tuition—indeed, so often with ourselves these few days, since our return from town—as to have warmly interested us.”

“Quite a *habitué* already, we found him,” coincided his lady, smiling a more elaborate suavity, “with everything left behind at Hinchbrook, from the dogs and ponies upward to the children's schoolroom and Mrs. Whyte. And certainly most welcome, for I assure you Mr. Nugent is an immense favourite of my own. 'Tis really a reproach to me, my dear Mrs. Smythe, that we saw so little of you last summer—but I set down this visit among our very earliest now. Pray, waive ceremony in returning it—we are likely to be somewhat gayer about Hinchbridge this season—my brother, Captain Norris, comes down to us in a few days, as adjutant of the Militia. One of the pleasantest men—has travelled vastly—served last in India. Suppose you join our family party to meet him, with the young people—a few friends to dinner, merely, in an easy way. Mayor Singleton, and his son, who expects a lieutenant's commission—with, of course, Sir Thomas and Lady Deane.”

Mrs. Smythe responded but distantly to the invitation. “She did not go out. Her health and spirits were not yet such as to allow it, even were the opportunities

likely. There were increased cares, besides, which now engrossed much of her time and thoughts." Privately, she had no wish to disguise the fact of changed position. She had an innate sensitiveness, too, which rendered it disagreeable, when Mrs. Ashburton, amidst casual glances round, with occasional use of the eyeglass, turned to her a clear, colourless fixture of the eye itself; and Mrs. Smythe exerted no small fortitude in so sustaining it as to remain ever lady-like, ever truer to the Rectory days than before.

"It struck me," said Mrs. Ashburton, composedly, "that to meet my brother might be desirable. Having been in India, you know, and indeed of some influence with Directors, Norris might have been of service—willingly, too—for Mr. Nugent is sure to please him. Such a general favourite, as I said—with those fine eyes of his. Tall for his age, too—he can scarce be eighteen at most, I see, Mrs. Smythe," with a complimentary smile to the mother's appearance. "But almost ready to begin life—impatient for it at once, it seems, himself! Naturally enough, perhaps, there is greater candour on your son's part with strangers—his young companions, I mean, who make no secret of it from their sisters—so that it has reached us of course. And really, I think, a brilliant career is open to Mr. Nugent, with those admitted merits of his—his evident ambition to rise—that charmingly impetuous temperament, as I call it—which ought not to be thwarted, my dear Mrs. Smythe. You are aware he is bent upon India?"

Mrs. Smythe flushed up, but bent her head in mute acquiescence; then gazed inquiringly from Mrs. Ashburton to her graver husband.

"Nugent's late statements have certainly been tantamount to a desire for my becoming his advocate, my dear Madam," agreed the Squire. "Though I *did* intend the choice of some more private occasion. But he expressed as much, only a night or two ago, to my eldest daughter—'twas so, I think, Matilda?" He turned to her, be-

hind him. "La, papa!" was the answer, a little disdainfully. "'Tis not *I*, I vow, that has so much of Mr. Nugent Smythe's confidence. 'Twas my younger sister—Margaret, I believe."

Margaret Ashburton looked round with annoyance in her fair young features, which, playful as they were with Lizzy, could assume a haughty air. She seemed to affect a laugh, and said, "I don't know that it was Nugent in particular. The other boys were there, I'm sure. Why do you call me a confidant, Matilda?"

"Come, Meg," resumed her father, with an indulgent partiality of manner, "what said the young gentleman, though?"

"That he would go, I think," was the quick reply, "if he had his will. 'Twas I that spoke of *you* helping him, I believe, papa. I wished it, indeed. I was annoyed at the time. I admire Indian princes. Not Indian officers, when I've seen them!" Then Margaret looked up and laughed in his face, also laughing round to Mrs. Smythe. Mrs. Smythe brightened at the smile, and again quietly eyed Margaret with a deep hidden pleasure; girl though she was, not sixteen at furthest, she was so archly cheering by that sunny glance and rich complexion, beaming cordially round; after appearing rather superb in her slim erectness, with feathered hat and veil, looped walking-skirt, and modish fan, when her cheek had suffused, and her hazel eyes had shone out, and she had drawn herself up grandly.

"Pshaw! Half of it *your* mischief, I see, gipsy! She laughs at Uncle Norris himself, who has spoiled her in town," said her father, turning fresh cheer to the Rector's widow. "I would not check our young friend, to tell the truth. No one can be better qualified to inform him than Captain Norris, whose health obliged him to leave the East."

"Constitutionally delicate and bilious, however," said Mrs. Ashburton, "whereas Mr. Nugent appears the perfection of health and strength. No want of the sanguine

temperament, either. To succeed in India, one cannot go too young."

"With his own will allowed him," continued the Squire, thoughtfully, "after a little calm reasoning, for which I have yet had no opportunity—then there come the necessary previous studies, without which I would on no account have a youth make his outset to so important a sphere."

"Ah! and *these*, Mr. Ashburton?" asked the mother, catching at it seriously.

"A little practical geometry, of course," was the grave reply, "and some scientific knowledge—then most certainly, at least the rudiments of fortification—theoretical gunnery—with a general knowledge, beyond doubt, of strategetic principles and of military history—such as none but the mere adventurer can neglect, unless secure of the highest genius. We do not assume *that*, Mrs. Smythe, for Nugent. No. Yet we are not going to throw away his fine qualities at his first caprice—*odor incognita vento periens*."

"Which—to use plain English," added the lady of Hinchbrook, "might at all events be obtained in a single university term—enabling him also to consider as to the Church or Bar. At Hinchbridge, here, I fear these abilities are lost." Addiscombe was not yet devised in those days.

Mrs. Smythe met the eye of Mrs. Ashburton with a sudden steadiness, while the distinct, calm tone of her answer spread a silence through the room. "The truth is," she said, "I agree with you. I had already decided to let Nugent have his way. I not only said so to him this morning, but when our curate called the evening before, I had mentioned it. Mr. Webb appeared to think himself able, if it must be so, for any preparation required."

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly, my good friend," was the eager response of the Squire, "with the help of various shelves in my own library, and the suggestions of Captain

Norris. We shall keep him by us a little longer at any rate." And he might have discoursed longer, despite Mrs. Ashburton's impatient glances at her gold watch, but for the abrupt throwing of a shadow from outer sunshine on the garden window. It was Nugent himself, fishing-rod in hand, pausing at sight of the group inside as he hastened past to rejoin the voices of the young Ashburtons at the gate. His animated face could be seen to glow inward, half proudly, half pleased, while little Lizzy and the others kept him there: the Squire rising to step that way, with a kindly nod and inviting sign. He did not seem like one impatient for new scenes, or wronged out of his prospects by foolish fondness, as people appeared to have thought; not even when young Margaret Ashburton pulled the casement ajar, in her wilful style, waving him aside to see past as before, and saying gaily that he came in their light. Lizzy and she were still peeping and peering out at some other thing, with half-whispers between them, and Nugent only laughed and dashed onward again.

"Dear me, what a restless old person, to be sure!" resumed Margaret, in her close confidences with the little girl. "But can't you see the other's face, yet, Lizzy? His man would scarcely sit, while he walked about."

"He's got his hat in one hand, so," returned Lizzy, secretly: "and then he's always feeling his nose. Now he's holding his chin! No—it's not Solomon, though—it's some gentleman." It was the large room of the end-wing they were watching, with its diffused half-light from the furthest window, thrust forth in tempting perspective on the old sunny flower-garden; amidst which, by intervals, the stout figure of the old gentleman in a variegated dressing-gown, a paper in his hand, his gesticulations most active when his strides were least rapid to and fro, had become too unusually obvious for the composure of Lizzy Smythe. She had amused her sprightly companion with it, into a curiosity in which the Squire was joining, over their shoulders; till at his

daughter's notion of a tiger in a cage, he looked too. "I declare," was little Lizzy's sudden discovery, almost aloud, "the other's Mr. Price."

"Eh?" whispered the Squire also, making a playful start, which covered her with confusion, "Hist! *who*, my dear? Oh—oh—Price of Notley! So it is—something astir, be sure. But hush—I'd rather Mr. Price didn't see *me*!"

Mr. Ashburton turned, with a glance at his own watch. He was surprised at the time they had stayed, fearing they had detained Mrs. Smythe far too long—in fact, perceiving she had left other visitors in her drawing-room, who would become impatient.

Mrs. Smythe was not, on the whole, sorry for the opportunity to explain; and did so calmly. Part of her house was let, she said, which she could well spare, for a short time only, as yet, to a gentleman merely residing temporarily at Hinchbridge—an old gentleman recommended by her obliging neighbour, Mr. Muggops, of the "Blue Pig." A tenant, she thought, Mr. Muggops was, of Mr. Ashburton's own? A respectable man, on the whole, she believed?

Mr. Ashburton put his hand up to his chin, smiling a little. Well—well—certainly, on the whole, as she said, Muggops was a tolerably well-conducted—a—um—tavernkeeper. He had had some doubts about renewing the man's lease, but was glad to hear that Muggops was obliging—a good neighbour—glad to hear it from Mrs. Smythe, and it would now stand in Muggops's favour. As for the good man's recommendation, on the other hand—his references or vouchers—why, there might perhaps be better. Mrs. Smythe's own man of business, for instance—or any such reliable authority.

Mr. Price was her man of business, she said—perhaps she had better consult him on the matter, before continuing to let it. To get the end-wing let, in fact, for something like a permanency, was an object to her.

Mr. Ashburton thought it "perfectly natural, when

there was superfluous room : he wished very much," he said, laughing, "that they had as much spare room in proportion at Hinchbrook." And the laugh was followed by a somewhat grave shade ; for Hinchbrook Manor was old and rather small, the former Squires had been very hospitable, his family was large, yet there was little likelihood for some time of spare funds for an additional end-wing.

"Positively, we must go, though, Ashburton," said the lady, starting and rising from out of a slight absorption. "Really a charming situation this, Mrs. Smythe—substantial, commodious old place ! Quite as well, living so retired as you do—not going out much at present—to let part of it. You should be cautious, however, as to references—certainly, cautious. For my own part, I think, 'tis quite possible—very probable, indeed—that we might recommend the place to some one or other. Some permanent occupant, perhaps—at least one to whom terms are no object."

"Come, Amelia," said the Squire, hastening their departure. "Were the present tenant to want it, he could have no better voucher than Mr. Price, if he had him. Mr. Price, though a Whig lawyer, is in every sense perfectly respectable. Good morning, Mrs. Smythe—good morning, young ladies," and he carefully shook hands, smiling, with little Lizzy.

As they passed slowly down the lane, homeward, Mrs. Ashburton was meditative. "My dear Amelia," remarked the Squire, "was it really Uncle Norris you had in view, just now?"

"There is no particular reason, Cuthbert, why I should conceal that it *was*," she answered. "It would be excessively convenient on the whole. If Norris remains with us, as I trust he may—for Edward was always my favourite brother, and he seems to more than return the feeling, in his evident fondness for Margaret—why, we shall really be at a loss how to accommodate him. Officers, especially Indian ones, require room—which, it

seems, he might have at that Grange, and I don't know where else in our vicinity. He could have his own bachelor establishment there, quite to perfection."

"Did you not observe, though, my dear," her husband asked, with surprising acuteness for him, "what a young-looking woman—to say truth, attractive, if not pretty—Mrs. Smythe still is? There is something that peculiarly wins upon you, knowing the difficulties of her position—and she has a good deal of Nugent's turn of feature, without, to be sure, his spirited eyes. There might be danger to Captain Norris, think you not—as a next-door neighbour, a tenant of the fair widow?"

Mrs. Ashburton turned to him, with the smile of superior practical knowledge. "My dear Ashburton," she said, "they are Furnished Apartments. Men like Norris are in no such danger, at least, from the landlady of their lodgings. And what I like best about Mrs. Smythe, since we are, it seems, to keep up the acquaintance—is her good sense in apparently feeling the exact position. As a person of sufficient taste to adhere to it, she shall have my best assistances on her behalf—I mean to countenance her in every proper way. And what we should first do for her, I think, is to help the son off her hands. A positive burden, at present. Nothing but a burden—and I must say, decidedly inclined to idle."

"Fine parts, indeed—very fine parts," was the tiresome answer, at which impatience seemed useless. "And now I have leisure, I mean to see to it, that they are quickly pushed on under our good curate. . A lad of merit. An only son, too!"

Then as his wife resorted to an emphatic silence, not without consideration of the two young ladies behind, Mr. Ashburton had much to do in matching his imperfect pace with hers down Hinchbrook avenue, while he also gently hummed a tune.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. PRICE, ET CETERA.

JUST as Mrs. Smythe was thinking of Mr. Price rather anxiously, in reference to the doubts thrown on such guarantees as Muggops's—when she had begun, in fact, to think of writing to Notley on the matter—Mr. Price himself was announced by Sarah, and straightway entered. Mr. Price's business air was on, but nevertheless his friendship shone through it, on the occasion, with most obvious satisfaction. As if he had a sort of wish to show beforehand, indeed, that he *was* satisfied; that, on the whole, affairs were looking up and prospering beyond his expectations; and that his recent absence in person, or his deputings of his young man, Gimble, had been owing to no loss of zeal on her behalf. He rubbed his hands with particular briskness and alacrity, looking about the room in the cheeriest way, like a lawyer who had nothing on his mind for his client. He smiled and smirked at the proof of his having broken in on lesson-time, just after it had been delayed for the previous visitors; and chucking little Lizzy under her plump, dimpled chin, indicated that her particular friend, Mr. Gimble, was in the gig at the gate, and would no doubt have pleasure, if they got on their hats and spencers, in giving both her and her sister a drive along the village on the Chelmstone road; while he, Mr. Price, had a talk with their mamma. So the two girls hastened off in delight to Mr. Gimble; and Mr. Price plunged almost as joyously into the subject of the successful lodging scheme, Mr. Gimble's notion. It was as if they had no further question to touch on, nor he any other point to broach.

He had just left Doctor Smith, in fact, after a long professional visit. Being casually acquainted with him before, in a manner—and that highly to the Doctor's credit—which had naturally led to the Doctor's attention being directed to him, as a man of business—for Doctor

Smith had business requiring management, having been led to perceive an opportunity for it at Chelmsstone, where he was in a way to acquire property in the long run, in spite of Mayor Singleton's teeth. All with his characteristic shrewdness—for a shrewder man than Doctor Smith, Mr. Price thought, did not breathe. Certainly not in the whole vicinity, parish, district, or borough bounds. Thus the Doctor had become, in short, a client of Mr. Price's own. So that, far from considering Mrs. Smythe's procedure rash in the circumstances, even on the mere recommendation of that decent-enough individual, Muggops—"My dearest madam," insisted the little attorney, most cordially, "you have happened to take the exact course—the precise course, I do assure you, which I'd have advised if consulted. Not that I'd approve it in—no—not on a repetition, certainly. Far from it—very far from it. There are doubtful characters—there are such things as designing swindlers, ma'am, in this world, who might settle in advance at first, only to cheat the better in the end. But I happen to have the very best tangible securities for the respectability and substance of your worthy lodger—of which nothing could be better than the County Bank of Chichester, not to speak of deeds of lease from old Singleton, and the Doctor's own unmistakable character. His force of mind, ma'am, is something unusual—he sees a long way forward—though a plain man, perhaps not just elegant in his manners, he has the business talent of a Beckford, combined with something almost like the turn for generalship of a Marlborough, on perceiving a false move in an adversary. They've really made a false move again,—after first shutting him out, on an absurd suspicion, from a mere night's lodging in the inn—then forcing him from the tavern, when but half inclined to stay. What d'ye think they've done *now*, ma'am, to provoke him, as soon as 'twas found he'd got fixed to the place?"

Mrs. Smythe, having no idea of the adversaries in

question, was quite as unable to conceive the measure referred to.

"The local Blue party hereabouts, I mean," said Mr. Price. "Why, gone and insisted on his servant standing the militia-ballot at Chelmstone this morning—and *had him drawn*. Had him drawn to serve, actually, according to the mere letter of the law. The man had scarce become a resident, and was just within the age and standard!"

"Is it possible? Has he enemies, then?" was Mrs. Smythe's vague response.

"Pooh! Mere petty local spite—in great measure, no doubt, aimed at myself," Mr. Price continued. "Of course we'll find a substitute, whatever the cost, however difficult in the circumstances, with all the Deane interest leagued against us. I'm going up the way at once, to Muggops's, where I'll contrive to manage it. Very foolish of them, though, if they knew it—very foolish indeed. He's a rich man, ma'am. He's a man of mind and energy, only needing to be roused—and hitherto, I must say, apparently indifferent in a singular degree to political questions, which at the present moment it's impossible—quite impossible to shirk. One side or other, Mrs. Smythe, a man *must* espouse! In this baronet-ridden, squirearchical locality, why,—the Blues have been positively so unaccustomed to the least contradiction, that it drives 'em distracted at once. But if they don't take care, they'll have it—they'll have it in a way to astonish 'em, ma'am!"

Smiling gently, Mrs. Smythe expressed the hope, however, that a *woman* would be excused from concerning herself with politics; of which she knew, to confess the truth, nothing whatever.

"True—true, my dear Mrs. Smythe," rejoined the active lawyer. "Precisely my advice to you. Almost precisely my remark to my other client, *your* lodger. It will not do in any way to compromise you. And really,

his irritability at this annoyance of the bailiff's *did* seem a little excessive, so I cautioned him. I did not forget your interests, I assure you, and at once suggested the proper mode of dissociating you from all possible identification with him or his—all responsibility for his views, principles, and course of conduct henceforth, in the eyes of these village functionaries. Without depriving you, of course, of the pecuniary benefit. He must either take the premises, furniture, and all, in regular form from me, ma'am—as a separate house, which it is—or he must leave, taking the independent attitude he is resolved on. That, ma'am, was my bounden duty to you as another client, and I adhere to it."

Mr. Price looked impreguably professional at that moment, and the perplexed eyes of the Rector's widow consulted him timidly.

"Doctor Smith, let me state," pursued he in the same tone, "is self-willed. He is, I think, in some respects whimsical. He is a Dissenter. He is, beyond what I approve, a thorough-going reformer. So far you have a right to be informed, ma'am, before deciding. Further than this, though entirely in his confidence, I need not and cannot go, for professional confidence, my dear madam, even towards another client, is sacred. Professional confidence, Mrs. Smythe, I musn't exactly violate!"

And as Mr. Price smiled again in a very satisfying and assuring manner, his other client hastened to disavow the slightest wish for such a sacrilege.

He might say that "a liberal offer—a most liberal offer—had been forthwith volunteered on these terms by the Doctor—always provided that a certain arrangement with the landlord of the tavern were to fall through. A mere understanding," Mr. Price considered it, "a preposterously unsuitable understanding, which a single sentence to Muggops this afternoon would serve to dispatch. The Doctor is absolutely fantastic in his notions of adherence to the letter! Was he, Mr. Price, then, to conclude that Mrs. Smythe acquiesced, as his client,

in the transaction which he would return to close with the Doctor?" "Ah! If he so advised." "Not a doubt of *that*. The sum he might now name (a sum that almost frightened her in comparison with late incomings and necessities) was, he must observe, for half-year's rent from date of current month's expiry, added to value of furniture, fittings up, et cetera. It would be at her command to-morrow. If not drawn for before Mr. Gimble passed that way again, Mr. Gimble would safely hand it to her. He might suggest a deposit in Chichester Bank, unless there were good bars on the window-shutters—and, by the way, a branch bank at Chelmsstone *might* ere long be set up—he wouldn't say why or how, but an exceedingly desirable thing—an idea only conceivable by a capitalist of intellect. As for every other detail of this little business, Mr. Price himself would of course see them regular."

Now, as Mr. Price had already got up in a hurry, seeming on the point to go, it was natural to suppose he had nothing further to mention. Nevertheless, his smiles were suddenly overcast by an evident recollection, rather inclining to awkwardness on his part, if not to an apologetic air.

"There was another matter, Mrs. Smythe," he at last acknowledged, hastily sitting down again, "on which I hoped you'd have had to speak. Rather more important to you, ma'am, of course. You may have forgot to say if you've got a letter any time lately, from a certain London firm—wholesale druggists they are, in a first-rate trade—about your son. Ah? About Mr. Nugent?"

No such letter had arrived. The inquiry was strange; and while reminding the mother of an omission also in their business together, it tended to agitate.

"Oh, nothing of consequence—nothing as yet, I do assure you, to despond about," was Mr. Price's tranquillizing protestation, amidst some flutter in his own case. "You'll have the letter yet, I suspect, for they said as much in their note of reply to me. A most un-

gracious, uncivil, crusty set to deal with, I must say, and I wouldn't have troubled 'em for an ordinary client. But they assured me you'd hear from 'em satisfactorily, however little they'd to say with attorneys, as they chose to call me. Ruck and Co., forsooth! The truth is, my dear madam, I succeeded in discovering, after some pains, that this Ruck and Co. were neither more nor less than the brother of the late Rector, with whom you're no doubt aware there had been a quarrel."

Mrs. Smythe had some knowledge of the circumstance, which she faintly admitted. An obscure brother, long estranged by some bitter early division, he had been at times unavoidably mentioned by the Rector, but ever in terms of elevated moral pardon and religious compassion. A half-forgotten man, asked at length to the funeral, and not even appearing there. She had not been aware, as now informed, that he was the sole surviving partner of a firm called Ruck and Co. Nor was it easy now to excuse Mr. Price, especially as he shifted his chair again, not to see the dignified portrait—for having without her knowledge written to this man, this coarse, relentless, low-minded plodder in the City, whose money Mr. Price confessed to be the only reason, in Nugent's behalf.

"I admit," said the little lawyer, fidgetting, "I took it into my head the quarrel might have been mutual—faults on both sides, ma'am—similarity of character and so on. Though coarse, however, the man seemed honest. No flummery—no pretence or speciousness. He can't avoid doing something for his nephew, in fact. Knows your address now, at least, and must be shamed into it. I think you'll hear—I do think so—but really I've exceeded my time. Good day—good day, my dear madam, till next opportunity."

But ere he went, Mrs. Smythe compelled his attention to the fact that her mind was made up about Nugent. He was to have his own way; and if he *would* go abroad, to India—then, all the preparations in her means to give

him should be furnished. Nay, Mr. Price assured her of his opinion as a friend, that youth must have its way, and it was a wise intention.

When left alone, Mrs. Smythe sat down with a feeling as if the tears would have come to her eyes. But she composed herself very resolutely, thinking that ere the end there might be various chances ; really, in fact, counting with a secret glee on some of them that looked real, such as her new tenant and his liberality, which to Sarah would have appeared fabulous.

CHAPTER VII.

FATALITIES.—THE CURATE'S ACQUAINTANCE EXTENDED.—
A SCENE OF THE "DEANE ARMS."

It was to the Hall people a matter of no small exultation, mixed with undeniable spite, that for a good many days every effort to procure a substitute for Solomon in the militia proved vain. Mr. Price and his young man, Gimble, appeared almost to have given it up in that locality, for Joe Muggops rather hung back ; and few men, indeed, who were liable to serve, could say as yet that they were safe. Whether the fellow himself cared much about it, would have been hard to say from his manner, still less by his words ; if he did not even take a grinning pleasure, to the landlord's view, in the notion of putting Doctor Smith about a bit, and getting out from under his control, in a livery so different. He might have been thought, once or twice, to take the laugh at himself or the authorities—though he scowled at it from anyone else—at the fancy of his helping to defend the country, not to speak of looking straight along a musket-barrel, or keeping his heels well together. As for his age, his inches, or his passing the surgeon, it was not when he was by, that every one agreed there had been a right-down trick in the whole thing, to annoy the

master ; might be, to provoke him to something rash. For if there had been a chance, no doubt the Mayor of Chelmstone would have let them draw the very Doctor. Solomon himself never hinted at a purposed loading of the ballot-box, or foul play of any kind ; he only sniggered at it, as if the creature were a little inclined to be vain in spite of everything. The muster-day and drill-time drew on ; when the uniforms and arms, that had been given out, would have to appear in bodily array. Yet Old Sol, as they called him, gave no sign of discomfort or impatience like the Doctor, who had at last to trudge on foot to Chelmstone, if he went there ; instead of being driven. His man contented himself perfectly, when not required at the staff-quarters, with sitting about, whistling or looking on in the tap at the "Red Lion" in the town, or on the sunny bench before the "Blue Pig" at Hinchbridge : with a look, no doubt, that was particularly uncertain, so far as it was not elvish. He still found time to groom the mare, indeed, and was regular in his hours at the Grange ; where once or twice the old gentleman was seen to accost him, as if pleased at not being quite left. Doctor Smith was evidently anxious about it. There was some ground for his anger, always kept up by disappointment about the substitute. Seeing that if Solomon were forced off, he must either give up his active mode of life, or find a new man : unless, of course, he depended on the willing services of Sarah Flake, staying more at home, coming more in contact with the family at hand. Both militia-substitutes and serving-men were scarce at the season, being harvest-time ; which needed the quicker despatch because the enemy would not wait, neither could the training-officers and drill-sergeants. War—war ! The Emperor Napoleon furious against perfidious Albion ! A great camp gathering opposite the Sussex Downs, along the heights by Boulogne ! Captain Norris was come down to Hinchbridge. Colonel Deane arrived from Parliament—at first to shoot partridges—on second thoughts,

to assist Sir Thomas. Sir Thomas was out again with them, and pranced along the roads, sometimes in partial uniform, eyeing the harvesters with their sickles as if he could not long allow them. Even the Squire, on his quiet cob, occasionally acceded to the cavalcade which made Hinchbridge warlike.

But for these things, Mrs. Smythe's tenant was becoming to all appearance settled. Nobody in the village stared at him now, if he walked along. He could not help so often meeting little Lizzy about the gate, that at length she gave up peeping askance, and fairly dimpled out in a laughing smile to him; greatly to his confusion at the first. For the old gentleman's reddish complexion absolutely flamed up in what seemed a blush, and with a bewildered manner he put his hands in his skirt-pockets to seek for something; which not finding, he stuttered and hurried past to his own door, and plunged in and closed it. As for Jane, there had been a genteel air in her deportment on such occasions, which must have awed him into silent deference when they passed each other; for Jane's black eyes were peculiarly quick and capable of a reserved expression, and she aimed at a refined carriage, having the effect of primness at her age. Nugent was for the most part in haste, but he seldom failed to show respect for years, by making way or giving recognition in a nod: then Mrs. Smythe herself had once or twice found it unavoidable to bow, even from inside a window, till it was plain that some day they must chance to speak if the relation lasted. A certain old-bachelor-like awkwardness there was, certainly, on which gratitude itself would have restrained her from intruding; had it not been joined at any rate to a degree of stiffness, occasionally almost stern, as if he were not the person to acknowledge having conferred a benefit, or to like any thanks.

He had matters on his mind, too. To keep up his personal oversight of the Chelmstone works seemed an

object with him ; being, as they must in his case, more an experiment for further purposes of importance, than a mere matter of business which the manager could carry through. He set off most methodically, during these days, and most sturdily ; with an air of determination not to fail for want of Solomon, nor to depend on him too much. He was not going to be forced, it was plain, by Solomon, into altering the household arrangement ; though Solomon, as Sarah thought, made pretences of militia orders to linger behind, beyond what was necessary, peering after him in a thoughtful way ; staying about the kitchen also, in a manner by no means uncomplimentary to herself, though she fancied him sometimes disposed too much for talk about the family. He was gloomy, was Solomon, however. She could feel it, if others could not. The militia-matter weighed on him. He stood in need of company, advice, and perhaps friendship. He was doubtful whether the governor was his friend or not. And Sarah did incline to counsel him, if he could find a substitute, to escape the militia and avoid the risks of warfare, remaining quietly at the Grange. There was for the moment a sort of servant-confidence between them, through which Sarah hazarded the very shrewd guess, that if he would, he could, for there were idle fellows enough about the "Blue Pig." Nay, she went so far as to say, that the "Blue Pig" was a bad school to make young men discontented, hankering after a gay coat and an idle life of fighting and drinking. But she was a sensible woman, Sarah Flake, under an uncouth guise, and had a fund of homely prudence from which she took occasion to read him a lesson while she went on scouring her pans, so that he was evidently impressed. When she briefly added, that to her eye he looked better in his own decent livery—Solomon's met it for a moment. Suddenly he looked away ; owning, with a laugh, that she might have hit the truth in part. The fact was, he did know a man—a poaching fellow he was, who had not

been drawn, though the bailiff and the gamekeeper would no doubt have been glad of it. Cox was his name—Dick Cox. And this Cox was ready at a word. They understood each other, in fact. But he was greedy, was Cox. His price was certainly far beyond what the governor and the attorney would look at, if he told them. Solomon was not going to tell them and be refused. For his own part, he had not a copper—he had saved nothing—he was a poor, reckless, thriftless fellow, himself, who had never had cause to lay by for a rainy day. “Money—money, Sarah,” concluded Solomon, with a slight sigh, “that’s what it comes to, after all. I’m not like the governor—I don’t have the heart somehow, to board for nothing. He’s got the habit, I s’pose. What it’s for, I can’t see—I sometimes wonder! I’d give a good deal, now, just to know—to get a guess, like!”

Sarah only suspended her work to stare. She wondered, too, along with him; but they made nothing of it.

“He’s miserly, then, I suppose,” said Solomon. “He’d grudge the price, anyhow. Shouldn’t wonder at all if he wanted to get rid o’ me, and reduce his establishment. *Slump* it, so to speak. I can’t see the use I’m of, either—that’s to be owned.”

This Sarah scorned to agree in. She was indignant at the old gentleman’s possible unfeelingness, or his conceivable views. She gravely inquired the price in demand by this Dick Cox.

“Fifteen pound,” responded Solomon, horribly, as if it were a sum that overwhelmed his own ideas. “Fifteen pound, Sarah,” repeated he, looking to see how it terrified her. “Never so much as saw that amount together in my life. But never mind. It’s not the reg’lar army after all. P’raps I’ll return. I mightn’t ha’ cared to be back to old Muggops’s, particularly—but the Grangery, Sairey—oho! Aha! It’s different. There’s something about the Grangery *I like!* I like it,” per-

sisted he, with a strange convulsive guggle down his throat, sitting up on the dresser with his short knock-kneed legs hanging and slightly knocking against each other, and looking now at her, now at distorted reflections in the burnished lids of saucepans near. "And I somehow feel I'll be back. After the war. In spirit, Sairey, if not in person, for I like it on the whole."

This did not, singularly enough, frighten Sarah. It was broad forenoon daylight, of a harvest day, the sun pouring in, the shutter ajar to make the kettle boil, the birds twittering close by. Had there been nobody in the house but themselves, she had no fear of him in any way. Neither mentally nor corporeally was she startled; while at the same time, Solomon, though affecting a degree of careless gaiety and laughter, was not altogether joking. It might have been thought rather to be *he* who became startled and terrified at her manner and subsequent words, when Sarah looked up at him from her knees, as she ceased to blow the fire, and slowly expressed her surprise at the smallness of the sum in question, for which he was so ready to give up his liberty, and risk his life. As for the Doctor's niggardliness, she disdained it.

"Here now, Mr. Solomon," added she, stoutly, laying down the bellows, giving her face a wipe with a rough red hand, where the finger-nails were wellnigh obsolete from charring drudgery, and getting up to walk across to a plain deal chest under a corner-table, of which she took the key from inside her neckerchief—"I'm but a kitching-maid, rose off scullery-work—an' not any great things is this place at the present time, which I'm more comf'able nor you'd think, considerin'. But what's fifteen pound if yer on'y savin' on extras an' such like? Look, I'll lend it to ye. I'll lend ye the fifteen pound, neighbour, and welcome too—that's to say, if yer want to be bought off. Pay the man, an' just you pay back sim'lar-ways. Lay by, see, and pay accordin'. That's how I has it here, myself—an' a bit more asides. If I

was skeary for robbers, here, I 'udn't a kept it by—fact be, it's safer, mayhap, in trusty handses, an' servints ort to be servint-like betwixt friends. Took me five year, it did, to make up, wails, perkisites, drippingses, an' all, at the Rectory, w're there was plenty agoin'—but *you'd* do it in *one*. Can see a thing or two when I'se put to it, an' you're a man I'll trust, if yer on'y pass the word ! ”

The man, however, somewhat amazed and aghast at first, had sufficient feeling to refuse the offer. “ I'm a crazy customer at times, my girl,” said he, getting down to his feet to draw back. “ No. I don't hanker for any one's money. Before I knew, I might spend it.”

“ Which ye'd harm more people than me, then ! ” said Sarah, taking caution and putting up her stocking again. “ It's more the widow's an' the orphanes' as mines, bein' come off the Rectory all along. What's more, before a year I might want it. There's uses for more nor fifteen pound, not far off.”

“ Besides,” said Solomon, wavering as he turned from her, “ It's the gov'nor's look-out. Well—no matter. Here. I'll borrow o' ye, then, Sairey, after all. I'll pay back too—no fear. Hand over, my dear.” She looked him straight in the face, and did so ; whereupon Solomon counted the guineas over, chinked them into one hand, pocketed them, and buttoned the pocket. It was only when she finally remarked about the “ Blue Pig ” tavern, that he might be the better, perhaps, to give it up for good—that he leered a little, again sidling towards her in a half-familiar way which she thought fit to check. “ See if I don't,” he said, more seriously. “ They'll be long evenin's soon—winter evenin's, Sarah. I'll think over it. That's to say, if a poor fellow might drop in here of a night, you know, to gossip a bit ? ” And Sarah, with a slight colouring-up, allowed that for such beneficial ends it was possible he might. Then she bustled harder, while Solomon withdrew himself.

She had no reason to feel uneasy next day, which was

the day to make up the muster-roll at Chelmstone ; when, with a passing nod to her, he set off at an early hour. Later in the day, to see the Doctor go out on foot again, was in itself less satisfying. He looked out of humour, thwarted, suspicious, in no social mood, ready to take umbrage at a trifle ; as if it were a strange familiarity in Nugent Smythe, after so often seeing him, to go the length that day of a cheerful remark about the weather, which certainly was hot for autumn, threatening thunder-showers. But Nugent was an angler, making his rod ready ; in spirits that left him no heed for the old gentleman's blunt tone of reply, so that he went on whistling a favourite old tune of the Squire's, whom he was to join at Hinchbrook ; meaning no offence, of course, to their next-door neighbour as the latter stamped onward, driving his walking-cane into the ground. Doctor Smith seemed as if a trifle might have made him leave the place for ever, shaking the dust off his feet ; a thought to make Sarah tremble. With that mien he was beheld along the village ; by Muggops behind his door, avoiding recognition lest the Blues should mark it against him ; by various villagers, that day not prompt to court his loud notice, nor to let their children be seen curtsying to him, with bare flaxen heads for him to pat as he asked their age, and felt for a penny ; by sundry folks, old or feeble, whose health he had got into the way of inquiring about, to recommend them cures and recipes, but that day singularly shy of him.

As Doctor Smith left the town of Chelmstone on his return home, the afternoon being far gone and the military show over on the Common, a shower having tended to scatter it, he put up an umbrella he had borrowed, and held resolutely on his way, looking well about among the various people who saw him. To no apparent result, however ; for at length he struck off apart, as if to make the best of his way home. Not lost sight of then, either ; seeing that two persons from the Common followed steadily in his rear, at such a pace

as to keep him in view without alarming him. Doctor Smith's conduct when alone, as he thought, became more suspicious than ever. Prompted, perhaps, by mere haste to avoid the circuit to Hinchbridge from that point, added to excusable fear of the manifest thunderstorm approaching, if not by guilty dread to boot, he now committed what bade fair to bear the aspect, in his observers' eyes, of an overt act. These two observers consisted of a local Chelmsstone tipstaff, acquainted with the ground, and a London peace-officer in plain clothes, armed only with a paper which he occasionally took from his pocket. It was a hue-and-cry, offering a hundred pounds' reward, on account of which the professional man had been on his way to Chichester races, but had paused for a stage at the "Red Lion," hearing of that day's review. He had seemed doubtful till now, stating that the man wanted was a slimmer fellow. As for the militiaman, his late servant, who had been dealt with already at the "Red Lion," and had allowed that for all he knew, the Doctor's name was Smith, but would not swear to it—he had had an odd look, yet no resemblance to the description. Besides, there was no accomplice suspected in the matter in hand. Its novelty lay in that point. It had been done, and could not well have been done otherwise, by keeping no partner. A regular deep system for years. And the London man cautioned the local tipstaff against rashness.

The so-called Doctor Smith had just passed an old stone stile, that let over into a broad opening through the Hall woods; but turned back again with a sudden thought, doubtless aided by some familiarity with the neighbourhood in his first peregrinations from Muggops's. He got up on the stile, looked round at the threatening sky, and hastily floundered over; although above his head was a broad, "To Poplar Farm only—No thoroughfare." Unless he was going to Poplar Farm, he might be about to cut across for the village centre, boldly regardless that Chipping Lane was closed, in order to

scramble over and make away with papers. They stole after him, and he did not turn to Poplar Farm, but actually held down toward the waste lane as supposed. Whereupon the two servants of the law looked at each other, and pressed on in his track the more steadily; only checked a little again by a new entrant on the scene, from Poplar Farm itself. This was no other than the Reverend Andrew Webb, Perpetual Curate of Hinchbridge, who on one of his pastoral rounds must have had occasion to visit the farm, and for a moment paused; turning up, and around, those moist-shining spectacles of his, which gave to the large mild eyes within them a capacious lustre as of skylights. Uncertain, it seemed, which way to go; inferring, it might be, that it was late, while a large drop or two fell upon the spectacles; and having neither silk umbrella nor gold watch, like the old gentleman who brushed past without heed to him; he nevertheless observed the latter, and coughed gently, hemmed louder, ventured to inquire the precise hour.

It was a blunt tone of reply, certainly; for although the old gentleman must often have seen Mr. Webb pass his windows to Mrs. Smythe's door, nay, must have been struck by the frequent pastoral visits thither, and the extreme partiality toward her son, his pupil, he evinced a disposition to cut the curate short. Still, when Mr. Webb started at the information, and hesitated no longer in taking the same path as his informant, alike unrecognizing any peculiarity in either the path or person, it would have been difficult to keep up a cross-grained aspect to him. "Dear me," remarked the curate, looking down from a colossal stature, and moderating the stride of a giant, "I shall be too late, I fear, even by this route! It *is* shorter, however, as I discovered in my way up."

"On no account, pray, reverend sir," said Doctor Smith, curtly, stumbling more than once in the long,

damp grass and stones, left open to cattle in the next pasture, "on no account delay for *me*!"

"Permit me, really, to assist you in this remarkably rugged path," was the placid answer. "As your umbrella, sir, requires heed." It was irresistible, that simplicity of his persisting in being rained upon, while he enforced the aid he mentioned. Half angry at it, partly ashamed into the opposite humour, the old gentleman found himself ere long proceeding down the lane with the use of Mr. Webb's arm, giving a share of the umbrella in turn, though Mr. Webb held it very indulgently over him. The thunder began to mutter, the lightning to flash, and the old waste lane, sweltering in the sultry closeness, with lustrous wet grass-blades, rank weeds, strange funguses and dripping foliage from the park wall, was vividly lit up by a stormy sunset; a very solitary spot, indeed, as if remote from town or village, instead of joining them together by a near cut. Quite new to the curate, though leading out close behind the church; till by chance he had noticed the breach in the pales that afternoon, and passed in unquestioning as unquestioned. Perfectly infamous to the old gentleman, who had more than once noticed it too; but seeing a trespass-board, with rigours of the law, had till now avoided it: he vented his repressed anger now, in fact, at the lane. "But beautiful, positively beautiful when thus seen," Mr. Webb argued. "A scandal—a flagrant scandal—!" his new acquaintance remarked, "a sheer robbery, sir, on Sir Thomas's part, I understand, from the poor. It belongs to 'em—it's the property of the inhabitants to pass through—it's *my* property, Mr. Webb, and yours, sir!"

"Do I, then, speak to a parishioner?" Mr. Webb solicitously inquired. "If so, you must allow, dear sir, that after all, Sir Thomas Deane is by no means chary, on the other hand, of his own park—he even likes to see the approaches made use of for convenience to both

parishes. I could have led you across, sir, that way, by a still nearer route to the main road!"

"Depends on where I'm going to," said Doctor Smith, obstinately. "Besides, parishioner or not, I want my rights, sir—I'm an Englishman! I don't want favours! Nothing of the sort!"

"Still, might we not consider," remonstrated Mr. Webb, "that privileges are conceded by Sir Thomas to the neighbourhood, far beyond these rights. The Hall is an exceedingly fine, large mansion, containing more than one elegant public apartment, a splendid library, sir—really a splendid one—with a valuable collection of pictures and some rare cabinets, I believe, of specimens—which are open to view for strangers every Friday during the stay of the family, at other times every day to all."

"Is that actually the case?" rejoined the old gentleman, with surprise. "I had no notion the old—the baronet, I mean, was so liberal—really liberal on the whole, I must say. Specimens—specimens did you say, Mr. Webb? Are you aware, sir, of what precise kind, as I am myself a naturalist—an amateur, merely an amateur."

"If I am not mistaken, chiefly in mineralogy," was the mild answer. "Sir Thomas Deane takes a personal interest in these, having coal mines in the west." The old gentleman shouldn't object, he said, to have a look at them—he was scarcely certain whether to consider himself as yet a stranger, or a resident—possibly there was some slight prejudice on the part of Sir Thomas against him, when his name was stated. Not impossibly on the curate's own part? He might state that his name was *hum*—a—well, it was Smith—Doctor Smith—stopping at the Grange, as a tenant of Mrs. Smythe's.

The curate was surprised, but not in the least startled. On the contrary, it augmented his friendly cordiality to the degree of pastoral interest, when he had pressed his spectacles on his eyes, and again looked at Doctor

Smith. Apologizing, in fact, for not having recognized him sooner, as the Grange pew was not far from the reading-desk, and the Smythes were most regular—most regular indeed. Mrs. Smythe was invariably there, among his most attentive hearers. An attentive hearer to his feeling possessed a strange influence over the mind. He believed, that since the Grange pew became occupied, others had become more attentive. He trusted he had even preached with more instruction, more effect. He had hoped, of late, that there was a slight but perceptible improvement at Hinchbridge. Its religion, its morals, in some respects, had allowed but too much room for that.

Dr. Smith eyed the curate narrowly in turn. He agreed with him on the religion and morals, nay there was more than that to be reformed—there was the whole system of things. “There might be grand reforms in Hinchbridge, if the curate himself, with the Squire, even old Sir Thomas, domineering as he was called, would agree to them. He had no objection to be at peace with Sir Thomas and join them—a slight explanation, perhaps—a little mutual understanding, which a word or two might settle on acquaintance?”

“Undoubtedly, undoubtedly!” said the curate, with eagerness. “You should see him—Sir Thomas Deane will relish it, I assure you. A most hospitable man, I understand—and Lady Deane is charitable in no common degree—they have lately suffered in their family, Doctor Smith—a favourite daughter, sir, by decline.”

“I didn’t know it, Mr. Webb—I didn’t know it,” answered Doctor Smith, with evident feeling. “I daresay something must be excused in such cases. The rain’s over, though—thankye, no more need for the umbrella. There’s the gap, I see—still open. I hope it’s left so, till the lane’s thrown free to the public again? They’ve seemed to wink at letting folks pass, these few days.” Very likely, the curate thought: Sir Thomas would no

doubt repair it first, before having the pales taken down. He lifted the single bar which was laid across, to let the Doctor step over a withered furze-bush below; after which they stood outside a little, before separating. "Shouldn't wonder, Mr. Webb," said Doctor Smith, "if for once in a way, before long, I were to come and hear you at the little old steeple-house, there—damp and dark as it seems!"

Mr. Webb rather stared at him; taking the remark, perhaps, for a mere oddity. "I confess, Doctor Smith," said he, "I like your conversation. Our views on the whole coincide. I may look forward, indeed, as an occasional visitor at Mrs. Smythe's in a pastoral capacity, to some accidental meeting?"

"Not acquainted with the family as yet," replied Doctor Smith. "No reason, however, perhaps, why I shouldn't—except, of course, a fashionable introduction, as I believe it's called. Sir, I'm not fashionable, let me tell ye."

"Is it possible?—as worthy a family as I know!" the curate ejaculated. "Mrs. Smythe is—that is to say, I have had for some time the additional honour, I should say rather the pleasure, of directing her son's studies. You cannot have failed to observe Nugent. We should be neighbourly, Dr. Smith—let there be a meeting, sir, pray! You might have it in your power, possibly, to advance his interests—to exert over him the influence, sir, of experience and force of character, such as are manifest, if I may so far venture, in yourself. It is even possible that you may be a man of substance—of wealth! I do positively assure you, Dr. Smith, that in my belief the assistance of a friend with wealth in his command at this moment to Nugent—Mr. Nugent Smythe, I ought to say—might be of the very vastest influence to his destiny!"

The old gentleman, as he stood back and looked his amaze at the extraordinary statement, nevertheless fairly yielded before it. The benign eagerness of the curate had no guile in it, and seemed to take him by

force. "Do you say so?" asked he. "I like the looks of the lad, I own. I shouldn't mind helping a bit, Mr. Webb, if I knew him—or through yourself, say?"

"It were preferable in a direct form," said Mr. Webb, with a somewhat shy movement. "No. The curacy is such, sir, as to support no such pretext on my own part. Nor have I any private means. Nor any knowledge of persons of distinction, or relatives in high station, who might be imagined to assist. Besides, Doctor Smith, the truth—the *truth*, you are aware, sir?"

"Nothing simpler, however, than to make us formally known—the whole family and myself at once," said the Doctor. "Suppose a quiet dish of tea at your own house some evening, reverend sir, to which you invite both parties. Otherwise there's an awkwardness. I don't mind coming up to the parsonage, sir, far from it. I appreciate the acquaintance." But the curate hesitated oddly. "The parsonage?" he repeated, and there was even a writhing through his ungainly stature, while he put up a hand to his limp fair hair in some perplexity. "Perhaps you are not aware that my mother, sir, Mrs. Deputy Webb, who of course presides at my table, is tenacious—somewhat tenacious of forms, and you have not yet visited her, I presume. But the truth is, there appears a certain rigidity on my mother's part, to me inexplicable, becoming well-nigh a coldness, toward the excellent lady in question, Mrs. Smythe."

"That alters the case," admitted the old gentleman; repressing, it might have been thought, an air of hidden enjoyment. "Trust to the chapter of accidents then—any day, in the lane, by chance, when we happen to come altogether. After my return, possibly, from my next trip to town. Don't let me keep you, sir—I go along the village a bit."

"Tea-time is past at the parsonage," said Mr. Webb, resignedly. "I need not now hasten. Dear me! What a flash—the storm is by no means over."

"God bless me—no!" responded Doctor Smith, listening to the crash that fell down over Hinchbridge,

reverberating round, and breaking up the brassy mass of cloud beyond the tavern roof into glaring white shreds, as if to let them drop fiery among the Grange trees. "But *what* the deuce!—eh? What's all the noise? That fellow Solomon again, as I'm a living man!"

"My dear sir—my good friend!" whispered the curate, putting his hand on him with agitation, "hush—these words, sir, how unsuitable! Excuse me—not so much on my account, though I have laboured much to prevent them in Hinchbridge—these young people, at all events—when Nature proclaims her awful——"

"Sol, I say!" was the old gentleman's angry call, as he ran out from the deep shadows of the churchyard wall, across the green, toward the "Deane Arms." "By Jove, sirrah!" A loud disorder was manifest there; on the nearer side of which, sitting steadfast enough on a bench under the oak-tree that bore the "Deane Arms" sign-board, was Solomon: evident by the full evening light, however, as the chief source of all that was wrong; for his attitude, his position, the very silence he seemed to preserve, were specially indicative to one who knew him, of a disposition to provoke and cause mischief. A perfect hubbub fermented opposite, round the door of the inn, where a yeomanry dinner had been held that afternoon, but whither all Hinchbridge appeared now rushing together in curiosity, surprise, and mirth, the weather notwithstanding, against the indignant sounds and angry motions of the company from within. Conspicuous near the door were two or three yeomanry horses, held still with no small difficulty; amidst which there began to rear and prance the huge caparisoned steed of Sergeant Sloane, just mounted, in a flushed state, his helmet scarcely keeping on, his pistol-holsters flapping, his cloak fluttering, while he shouted a profane oath or two that left those of Dr. Smith comparatively mild. It was hardly to be wondered at, however, since no less conspicuous in the foreground stood a figure that must have maddened him. Saluting him with drunken

seriousness, heels together, hedge-stake raised to the presenting movement, aspect singularly transformed like the bailiff's own, by a soldier's stock, hat, and red coat, was no other than Dick Cox from Poplar Farm, the suspected poacher—and he stubbornly disdained every pull from behind, every friendly hint or warning sign, whether from cobbler or gamekeeper. He meant to turn over a new leaf, he hiccupped—to reform—to serve his king and country—to show he knew a officer, though it was but the cavalry. “A’—a’ knows ye, though—Bub—bub—Bailiff Sloane, sir,” he muttered: and A’m Did—did Dick Cox mysen, mun!”

“To the stocks with him!” roared the bailiff; almost thrown off, at the next flash of lightning. “Where’s the constable—where’s the corporal? It’s a case of deserting! Catch the fellow himself—Smith’s man—blast it! Help! help! I’ll be down, I say!” The bailiff’s horse was seized, and with some assistance he dismounted. “There he’s—Sol’s *there*,” said several voices. Solomon made no reply: he leant back under the tree, sheltered from the heavy drops that began to fall again, though a scathed branch of that very tree denoted, by some former autumn, how doubly unsafe the irons of the sign-board made it. He met the gaze of the foaming bailiff with apparent indifference; there was a settled, inveterate gravity about the strange creature’s one eye, whatever the other might betoken, that scared the people, nobody laughing, nobody venturing near him. He looked so little like one in liquor, so wicked with it, that at Sloane’s order nobody ran forward; all whispering he would be struck. He was positively smoking a short pipe; and, taking another gulp from a spirit-flask, set the pipe between his teeth again, then breathed out a fume, half fire, like a being who could give out electric sparks himself. At that the bailiff’s rage grew uncontrollable, and he dashed forward in his own person, almost stumbling over his sword, which he caught up while he grasped Solomon by the shoulder, at the same

time receiving a violent shock from somebody else's head, who had charged opposite under the tree, clutching Solomon likewise. They both recoiled to look at each other, leaving him still composed.

"Come home, fellow!" thundered Doctor Smith.

"You'll see Chelmstone jail in half an hour, my man!" yelled the bailiff; glaring more fiercely still, however, at his master. But two other men had sprung in also at their backs; one of whom forced his knuckles into Dr. Smith's collar, while the other slapped him on the back. The old gentleman turned round infuriated.

"For the offence," said the Chelmstone tipstaff, showing a pocket-mace, "of trespass in Chipping Lane."

"For the crime, if I'm right," remarked the London detective, "of felony in the city of York." He produced a warrant. "Your name's Thomas Smith, I expect—alias James Jenkins, alias Bill Quigley, w'ich I s'pose is about the right one? Eh, sir?"

"Ho! I see, I see!" responded the bailiff, joyously, half in his passion yet, "all right—never mind t'other. Take him—take him, officers—that's it!"

"At your peril, sirrah!" was the old gentleman's answer, as soon as he could speak for indignation. It was rather dim under the tree at that moment, with the gloom of the rain about to plash in sheets over Hinchbridge; and the London man went out a step or two to consult his description. "I'd like *you*, sir," said he to the bailiff, "to stand me responsible, before we take it to the nearest magistrate—looks respectable—like a gentleman, sir. Don't see the likeness, I must own." "I'll bear you out—Sir Thomas 'll commit at once," growled the Hall functionary. "Very well, Mr. Sloane—very good, Sir Thomas Deane," said the suspected person, "observe I warn ye both that I am Dr. Smith at the Grange. Observe, officer, I warn you I'm Dr. Smith of ——" Here he said something apart in a low tone to the officer, who turned pale and started, waiting for the card on which the old gentleman scribbled some-

thing with a pencil, then saying he washed his hands of it. He had nearly made a pretty mistake, he thought, owing to the light, and that fool of a tipstaff. He buttoned his coat and walked straight off through the rain, with a touch of his hat to Dr. Smith.

"Wouldn't he be had up, though," asked the tipstaff, "for the trespass?" Close at hand was the curate of Hinchbridge, who had anxiously approached; and the curate explained that there was no trespass in the matter, unless the one which he himself had doubly committed. Bailiff Sloane, gathering up his sword, awkwardly pressing down his helmet, with an aspect none the less sulky, looked askance at the very clergyman of the parish, but was edging off. "Never mind," muttered he, scowling, "it'll come yet. Something worse, I warrant me. Take the deserter, at any rate!"

From the circle of the crowd around them issued a single hiccupping voice. "Du-du-dooly swore in, Measter Sergeant—a fo-fore noon an' took the-*hic*-test, they calls it. A'm a subbugicute for—for old Sol, there. No more gig-gig-*game*, Master Sloane—A'm agoin' to inform! Reg'lar reinformed I be, ou'd boy, a'ready!"

"They're a brace of villains," shouted the bailiff, amidst a roar of mirth at last, unchecked by the rain. "Two undoubted impostors, and I've no hesitation in saying they're—well—wait a bit!"

"Hist!" said the man Solomon, stealing forward. "That's nothing, Mr. Sloane—nothing, sir. Say something actionable, please? Oh—yes?" He put a hand to his ear, listening for it, as the bailiff looked ready to tear out the sword and cut him down. "Still I'm not so sure about your banker—rather it was Sir Tummas for the damages."

His master snatched him back by one arm, and the landlord of the "Blue Pig" by the other, out from among the confusion, scattered by the wet night. The man seemed mad, so that nothing would calm him but main force. Dr. Smith had forgot his own resentment

in anxiety to get him safe into a room of the tavern, where Muggops drenched his head with cold water at the Doctor's command, dripping though they all were already; till Solomon himself asked, with a sinister grin, for the strait waistcoat he had once before mentioned. A little of the familiar ale did him almost as much good; then a long pipe, which he sat and smoked gloomily. "Never let him taste anything stronger," added Dr. Smith. "I wonder, in fact, at his taking it. I don't believe he likes it, to tell the truth. But if I'm not mistaken it well-nigh ruined him just now—another rash word might have done it. And the worst was, Mr. Muggops, I'm not quite sure that the fellow cared!"

"'Twas all that 'Red Lion,'" said Sol next morning, rather ashamed. "Nothing but the 'Red Lion,' landlord. I'll swear that gin was drugged, as if I'd been a Blue voter! He! he! All right again, though." And he groomed the mare, went down to the Grange, and after being closeted a little with his master, very soberly drove him as before to Chelmstone.

The local air seemed clear. Everything but the national defences appeared comparatively peaceful. The looks of the hangers-on about the Hall, and of Mayor Singleton's understrappers, held shy of both man and master for the present. There was a vulgar notion abroad, somehow, that if there were such a thing as "the Evil Eye," then Solomon had it. The mere sense of power is to most men a pleasant thing, and not the least pleasant part of it might have lain in that feeling, if he were really necessary to Dr. Smith. There were even one or two, like Tom Hubbard and Dick Cox, who might have been thought fond of him for it, purring about him as did Muggops's black cat. Rubbing herself against him, courting the neighbourhood of his very hat, pleased with an occasional kick, stroked sometimes in the frosty weather that began to come, till she crackled and bristled up with flaming green eyes, the cat proved that Solomon could attach things to him. He was apt

to make his favourites "ticklish" to all else, though ; for Hubbard's politics grew bolder, his tame starling more opprobrious in its mimicry ; Dick Cox had a musket often in his legal possession, and on his way from drill in scarlet, he had a right to be out late, nay, a colourable pretext for taking short cuts on duty.

CHAPTER VIII.

VERY CHARACTERISTIC OF RUCK AND CO.

ONE cold raw morning of late November, as Sarah swept and whitened the front doorsteps of the Grange, the Chelmsstone post-woman came round from Dr. Smith's, bringing what was rare to that side of the house—a letter. A London letter, mis-sent to Notley, therefore doubly charged ; yet Sarah did not grudge the seventeen-pence halfpenny which she brought back from within, seeing how respectfully it appeared to have been addressed, to the Reverend Mrs. Dr. Nugent Smythe, Notley. And her mistress had taken it with eagerness, struck by the formal business handwriting, and the red seal of Ruck and Co. The expectation had lain at her heart, in fact, despite all other sources of independent effort ; and she had been unconsciously anxious about it, perhaps building on it to some extent.

When she opened it, seeing the commercial style, perceiving the cold signature "for Ruck & Co., J. S.," a chill came over her. The first complete perusal utterly quashed her hopes. The second rendered her indignant ; the third only satisfied her by restoring the independent spirit, with a determination to reply as she felt, casting away every further prospect from such a quarter. Thus ran the tenor of Ruck & Co.'s worldly, heartless, unfeeling epistle :—

"MADAM,—To hand is an application on your part, per Samuel Price, Solicitor, Notley, of date 6th July

last, which replied to in due course by clerk and now enclose. Owing to press of business, also not aware as to any such claim on this firm or any partner thereof, no answer heretofore returned to you personally. On consideration are however disposed to allow possibility of such application not being by you authorized, and now write accordingly.

“The late Reverend James Nugent Smythe, D.D., did not claim connection with this firm, nor any partner thereof, during his life—first intimation being per funeral letter. The fact was, that if said Dr. Smythe had any elder brother, as stated, his reverence most likely despised said brother and looked down upon him for a low character not fit for acquaintance. Moreover you may be aware that a disagreement existed between them, of which less said the better, being never made up to present date. According to our information, said brother returned said opinion of aforesaid Rector with interest and compound interest. Being a low vulgar ignoramus, denies all relatives so named. Don’t know the Nugents. Don’t know the Smythes. Went so far as to consider the Rector, when heard of, from the time he left his colleges, a made-up conceited piece of artificial learning and musty bookishness that forgot old friends to curry favour with the great. Fancied him an empty church-cushion and a service-book puppet, too grand to care about other matters. If mistaken, too late to find it out. Mere pretence to try, too.

“We are of opinion your late husband ought to have done his duty, madam, and not left you with a young family dependent. If he had effected a paltry insurance on his life, according to income, even though he died a bankrupt, no charity need have been asked. Notwithstanding which, being no fault of yours, we are inclined to do something within due bounds, same as for any other deserving family. It seems there is a son of age to exert himself for joint behoof, seeing which we have no objection to make an opening here, though still full.

A situation in either department of this business, wholesale or retail, is at a premium in town, without commencing allowance—but in present case we will give the young man his choice, if active and willing. Moreover, board and lodging, washings included, will be placed to his debit against future salary.

“As to any assistance proposed by aforesaid attorney, for the lad’s entrance among a pack of priests whom the country’s tired of, and won’t support much longer, I for my part,” concluded the writer, breaking into an odd solecism of style, “will have no hand in it. To speak plainly, madam, your boy must earn his bread as I did. Was not ashamed to invent a new pill or a carminative, and am not to this day. Anything to help him to make his own fortune in an honest way, shall be done. Likewise, if sensible and willing, the firm will allow something comfortable to yourself and daughters per annum till he can repay advances.

“We remain, Madam, your obedt. Servts.,

“*For Ruck & Co., J. S.*”

“*P.S.—A reply in course will oblige.*”

Mrs. Smythe crushed the paper in her hands, gentle as they had seemed. At the breakfast-table she concealed it from Nugent, but as she poured out the morning coffee to let him early away on a holiday-ramble with the young Ashburtons and the curate’s two boarders, she once or twice had difficulty in seeing his cup. He was in great haste, in high spirits, and said good-humouredly that he shouldn’t mind being late, but Sir Thomas’s hounds were out, and the Squire’s party would be at a certain point to watch for the hunt.

Very angry she was, when Nugent was gone. “Nugent, forsooth! A druggist! A wholesale or retail apothecary! That bright boy, with his brilliant parts, that the Squire spoke of! Was it a studied insult? Or but a vulgar, rude intention to be kind, after all—and perhaps, if the Church was against the taste of his newly-interested relative, his obscure uncle, now at last inclin-

ing to consider him—still, he might approve of Nugent's going abroad instead."

Everything bore cruelly to that drift, indeed. She could not trust herself to write at once, but carried on the girls' lesson-time first; then, in the short afternoon, sat down and wrote her reply. Giving up all further clings to the Church prospect, she did not let her irritation stand, for all that, in the way of Nugent's chance to go forth from her well-prepared and well-supported. She allowed the man his chosen estrangement, under the chill guise of "Ruck and Co.," and so wrote to him. Nevertheless afterwards, she broke like him into direct expression of her feeling, and vindicated the memory of the Rector. "No one," she said, "knows, or has a right to know, like his widow, the goodness that lay under the world's estimate of him. His affection for his own children, sir, and for——" here a tear drop made the ink run a little, "his wife, who never till now understood all his merits—these you have no right to question. I can tell what his regrets were, at not having sooner provided for us—what his intentions were, soon to do so—and his unsuspecting integrity as regarded all with whom he dealt, although it was not permitted him to prove it. That is his son's task, and Nugent shall at least understand it. If his choice is, to fulfil it in the manner you prescribe, good and well.

"As regards your dead brother's feelings towards yourself, the letter before me is not more ungenerous than mistaken. Without allusion here to his secret prayers, regarding what he must have thought error of opinion and misunderstanding of feeling—it is true that to *one alone* did he ever confide his mind on that point. This it would be unsuitable, however, for her now to condescend upon, or to desecrate any of his last faint words. To use your phrase on her own part, it is too late.

"And for my two daughters and myself, sir, let me

say at once, decidedly, and for ever, that we are in no need of charity. Whatever may be Nugent's course, it shall not deprive us of the satisfaction of independence. I had already begun to prepare his sisters for earning it, and shall continue to teach them as I best may, how sweet it is, as well as how simple. My success hitherto has exceeded the most friendly wishes, so that no fear need be felt, I trust, of their having to do chare-work or to beg, after they lose their present teacher. Be assured, at all events, that not knowing up to this moment of any connection who could save them from the possibility, they shall never obtain the knowledge which might clog their own efforts. If patrons or almoners are ever required by them, these will be strangers. For me, I have not the shadow of a claim on you. I would take the poorest dole, I would sing ballads through the streets, rather than have it, and I must beg you most distinctly to understand that Mr. Price's letter, however well-meant, was both unauthorized, and at the time unknown-of by me—nay more, that it has caused the very bitterest experience yet forced upon me." Then she also remained, towards this shadowy plurality of commercial gentlemen—in short, towards Messrs. Ruck and Co., for whom she addressed the cover—their "obedient servant, Mary Nugent Smythe."

When it was ready, it left a comparative satisfaction of mind; for nobody's advice or counsel, not the choice of Nugent himself, had interfered with the sharp instinct to give back defence for assault. Though it were to induce utter disownment from one of so mean a spirit, with coarse self-justification and eventual silence for the future, she did not repent of it. The very eyes of the portrait contemplated her with dignity, if not with a pursuing approval, as she put out the sealing-taper, and rose to the bell for Sarah. And Sarah, hurried on from everything else, to set out in time for the evening post at Chelmstone, found it indispensable to obey. It would

not do next morning, by the good-offices of Solomon on the chaise.

Sarah took shawl and basket, therefore, and trudged off rather unwillingly to the good mile's walk. She had done her chief errand, and was "killing two birds," as she said, "with one stone," by going to lay-in groceries, when Solomon emerged, whip in hand, from the "Red Lion" stable-lane. It would not have surprised him, probably, had she not wished aloud to him that there was a post-office at Hinchbridge. "May be, before long," said he; adding a more sympathetic question, however, as to why she wished it then in particular. "Not much correspondence yet, I s'pose, Sairey—hey? I'm jealous inclined, d'ye know? Ho! ho! Who's it to, now? Come, I'll post it, of course." Sarah Flake hastened to explain. Not that she stated any inability to write, if needful. It was her mistress's letter, already posted. "Oh. Well. You'll think I'm curious," Solomon said. "It's interest in the family, Sairey. Such a dull hole, about here—such few friends they seem to've got, too. Friends like *you*. And me, I hope. Didn't happen to notice who 'twas to?" It was close in Sarah—very close of her—not to allow at once she could not read, or even that she was not prying in her attachments; she was perhaps willing to oblige a joint friend, or reluctant to imply that he was inquisitive. "'Twere Mister Price, only," she answered with promptness. "In course—couldn't but 'a been. Come from Notley, the letter did, as it were a answer to. Not much use looking—I *knew* it. No, Mr. Solomon, I dun't call yer cur'ous for't by no means—I'm cur'ouser—but on'y wish yer heard our Miss Jane!"

He was not curious about Miss Jane, however; and Dr. Smith was visible, looking sharply after him, impatient to drive home. "Looks after me," said Solomon in haste, "like cat and mouse—not a moment, scarcely, to call my own of a night, yet, Sarah. Till he goes off to town again—going to town he is, and the nights 'll be

lonesome. Duskish before you get home, in fact, by the road—wish I could take ye up—tired ye'll be, too. I'd take down by Chipping-lane, now, if I was you. It's open. Lots o' folks cut down by it."

Sarah Flake was grateful for the intelligence, and bidding good-bye for the time, hastened her shopping to leave by the common for the stile-end by Poplar Farm. If it had looked lonely there, after passing the farm, it mattered not; since Sarah had fallen in with a Hinchbridge neighbour, equally unconscious about the convenience in question, but equally glad of it when told. At the other end, they did not find it exactly open, indeed: there were loose pieces of paling across, with thorny obstacles, easy to set aside and put back again. Outside there had been workmen busy with the ground, as if to remove the palisade altogether when that was cleared. A man met them, and stopped to say something, half in reproof, half in a good-humoured advice to make the most use of the time. It was the brisk young fellow, Francis Murphy, the Hall gamekeeper, who had always a pleasant tongue for women: besides, he made use of the short-cut himself, raising the bar and walking in, though he carefully put it back again.

CHAPTER IX.

EFFECTS OF WEATHER.

EVEN as the season of the year had had its influence on Continental shores, dissipating the camp about Boulogne by stormy signs, and warning backward from perilous waters the great armament of Napoleon, to turn him upon a safer victim than old England—so was it in a manner at Hinchbridge. The news had there a sudden influence, and so had the winter-time which followed fast upon their heels. Martial displays and high-constitutional principles were not, indeed, to be gathered for

nothing, and disbanded again without a use. Bailiff Sloane might lay aside his helmet, his people their general aspect of suspicion and authority, the head-gamekeeper his watchful air: the weather might be such as to keep the pheasant-copses safe till the first frost, though Dick Cox and Simon Gray might be more doubtful than ever. The rain and wind, the fog and cold, were in fact enough to render the country miserable outside, and Chipping Lane a perfect mire-trap, with an entrance at which neither workmen nor wayfarer meddled. Sir Thomas, Lady Deane, and daughters, left the Hall for their place in Kent, within easy reach of town. The tenant at the Grange, with his serving-man also, were absent in town beforehand; leaving a new dulness in the long nights. The most cheerful places were at Hinchbrook, where Captain Norris still remained at his post, suspending drill, to muster up the better Christmas party—and at the “Blue Fig,” where the October was in prime order, and Muggops likely to flourish beyond all precedent.

A very social and friendly season, it might have been thought, with everything pacific to correspond, was destined to shed at least its inward light over Chelmsstone and Hinchbridge. The very dye-work, busy as the manager from Chichester made it, was alike unconscious in itself of partiality to Buff or Blue; the manager was but a bustling young man, as yet content with his present salary and charge, and proud to get up an evening-club; no match, unsupported, for Mayor Singleton. The mayor could have bought him up, or out; he could have frozen him quite, just as the canal when the ice came would stop the dyery, and in a similar manner as he could have stifled out the dissenting preacher in the back-alley. That was to say, if the absence of the yellow chaise with the chestnut mare, driven by the little wall-eyed, knock-kneed man, containing the stout old gentleman with the energetic red face, were only to last beyond Christmas—or if any dire discovery could be made about that old

gentleman—or if a pretext could but be found for political charges against him—or if his manufacturing speculation failed, and he were behind with the rent, and got into difficulties. Nay, the brewing mayor was precisely the man to do it at any rate, in his ox-like, pig-faced, red-eyed, stupid propensity to low cunning, if it were shown to be for his interest with Sir Thomas Deane of Hinchley Hall and Estham Court; if that great personage vouchsafed a hint to him; much more, if Lady Deane had ever called on Mrs. Singleton, so that the baronet and she could have been invited to one single dinner of a gorgeous kind. He was not just going to try it for Bailiff Sloane. He had openly shaken his head to the bailiff, looking very significant, and said as much as that something was brewing, which might have been worth Sir Thomas's while to look into. But it might cost his private pocket, the mayor's, more than he cared to lose; not to speak of the increased custom to the town, the growing employment to work-people, the thirsty nature of a dye-work, or a certain benefit to the borough funds that had just been offered. The truth was, it had become undoubted, said the mayor publicly, that this Smith was a man of substance—a *warm* man—perfectly *good*—a business character, nothing political at all, no impostor. He could even vouch to the bailiff that he had been a doctor, and his very name was all correct. There was good reason to suppose he had hit upon a secret for turning out a new dye, that had taken greatly, washed well, and would make a fortune of itself. Nay, more, that it depended chiefly on a certain plant, which he, the brewer, shrewdly suspected was to be found in particular plenty about Hinchbridge or Chelmstone or somewhere near. This was really, old Singleton thought on pretty good authority, the true cause of all his suspicious courses at the first; the grand motive of his settlement, hitherto so unaccountable, about the place. Now, it was the likeliest thing in the world—quite conceivable—that this secret might come

out in some odd way, and either—"either, mark you, ruin the old fellow if he were as rich as Alderman Beckford, or be bought up, bought up, Mr. Sloane!" said the brewer, over a bowl of hot punch with the bailiff at the "Deane Arms." It was a day fit to chill the very marrow in one's bones, otherwise they might not have been so social when they chanced to fall in with each other.

"He—he—he!" laughed the mayor of the borough, warming his fat hands and gulping down another draught. "Chuck—chuck! And it's mere chance that Price is his agent. Price wants to buy a town-property for him, buy it right out for a high figger, too—to extend the dye-works and build work-people's houses. Was at us no later than yesterday. And why not? says the borough-council. Why not? says I likewise. A pack of tumble-down sheds at the present time."

"As sure as fate," exclaimed the bailiff, striking the table vehemently, "they'll enlarge the meeting-house out of it! I just warn ye, your worship. They'll have several votes, too, at next election."

"Ho! ho!" chuckled the mayor once more. "Catch me! The canal's town property, sir. No right to it in the lease. Could turn off the water to-morrow, if I liked. Don't teach me, Mr. Sloane. Come, just you let him keep quiet. The old fox ain't a politician, whatever he is, unless he's badgered into it, to be sure. What if I knew of a hair in the old fellow's neck—old bachelor, quotha! Respectable old gentleman, forsooth! And a methodistical hypocrite, too! Why, though he was to rule the markets and roll in wealth, he couldn't face the thing—he's hidin' from it, I suspect—must be in bodily terror of it!"

"Eh? eh?" said the bailiff, pricking up his ears and stretching forward. "What is that, though! How d'ye know, your worship?"

The fat brewer drew back and reddened, very confusedly indeed. He regained an official air, and said it

was *his* business. "Magister'l inquiries," replied he, muffling himself up to go. "I'd a right for to make 'em, sir, in a municipal capacity. Come in my way, on the bench, and they're strickly confidential—strickly *so*. Nothin' more to do for the present, with the old gentleman's moral character or domestic matters."

"It might be desirable, your worship," persisted the bailiff, with increased respect, "to Sir Thomas. I may say, sir, that Sir Thomas only wants to be convinced there's something wrong, and he'll settle matters. It's his duty, sir, as a justice, Sir Thomas says. As for the dyework, Mayor Singleton, why there's the manager—seems a smart fellow—must be able for it himself by this time."

"Sir Thomas ain't at home, Mr. Sloane, I b'lieve," said the brewer, hesitatingly. "Besides, I hear Smith's away at present. No scent likely, in fact, till he comes back again. Might make a few more inquiries then, of course, if I see he gets any more of the same style of—a—a—I mean if I hear of it again. It's a personal business—can't be transacted without seeing Sir Thomas."

"Sir Thomas and family to be back after the holidays," remarked Sloane, accompanying him down stairs to the inn-door. Quite sure a call from your worship would please His Honour. 'Twas but t'other day he mentioned in regard to the militia-liftenancy for young Mr. Singleton, he wished the young gentleman to get it."

"D'ye tell me so, Mr. Sloane?" asked the brewer with eagerness.

"Says the baronet," protested Sloane, "if you guaranteed the young gentleman's principles, Sloane, 'tis his—the commission's safe to him. Only Sir Thomas had a notion, sir, last election, there was a little want of zeal. I think, though, your worship, I might guarantee it."

"You may, you may, Mr. Sloane—don't doubt it an

instant. When Sir Thomas comes back—and *Smith*, of course—*Smith* must be *at home*, look ye—I'll go into it. I'll even run the risk of coming up to the Hall with the very next proof of it, to show Sir Thomas, myself."

"The post 'll serve for the present," responded the bailiff, cordially. "A mere note—a single line or two—quite enough to secure the young gent's commission at once, sir." As old Mayor Singleton turned his bloated face in a convulsive manner to the bailiff, out of his double-seated, hooded buggy at the door, the face grew flabby and bloodless. "What d'ye mean, sir?" said he hoarsely, looking at the ostler and his own driver, "what—a—a—*letter*, d'ye say! You—you—'re very bold to—to—propose such a thing, Mr. Sloane, t—a—a—magistrate in—in public. *Sh't*—it's—it's audacious in the——"

"S't—s't, your worship. Not at all!" was the quick rejoinder, with a glance of sudden intelligence. "I mean I'll write off straight to Sir Thomas, sir, about the liftenancy."

"Oh! Beg pardon. No harm in that, Sloane," said the mayor of Chelmstone. "Good day—drive on, boy—drive on, I say." Wherewith the Mayor, wrapped up in a severely-dignified mood, was driven home through the cold.

Extremely cold it was, before that Christmas. Hinchbridge might be glad enough to get itself comfortable in-doors, and be snug. The old parish-clerk's asthma kept him considerably down. Tom Hubbard, for his part, was much subdued by cold in the head; and as for his obstreperous tame starling, it was in a dejected state. While the landlord of the tavern rejoiced in business, nor only in that itself, but in the unwonted good-fellowship like to grow between customers; so long as the constable found no fault in Dick and Simon, neither could the gamekeeper accuse them of being unaccountably absent thence, nor of going home

too early. He, Frank Murphy, the gamekeeper, was profiting by the poor recruiting-corporal's departure, to make frequent visits about the bar; where Miss Emma could scarce withhold him from her good graces. So brisk a young black-eyed fellow he really was, well-made and able-bodied, with a gay way about him when off duty, if a thought quick in temper when upon it; and he dropped the oftener in, to the kitchen-circle, because little Solomon spent his holidays elsewhere. He could relish his hot jug of "bishop," had a fancy for "gin-twist," and could troll a stave with the best, or pass his jest from Joe Miller; taking his seat apart a little, though, nor ever staying very long, for he was thought to affect the gentleman.

At last, too, as was most natural and proper some three or four days before Christmas, it began to be snowy. At first, for a day or two, it was but a hoariness that settled out of the thick air, and was shed gently, irregularly, softly down, and snowed and stopped again; leaving a grey-blue gauze above, from which at times wandered a stray flake or feather to the ermine-furred houses, to the woolly skeletons of trees, to the fleecy fences, to the earth all powdered over like a sugared cake with plums beneath, with bride's-cake ornaments and obvious living figures in fresh colours. Out of the front window of the Grange parlour, when thus the air had cleared; how conspicuous grew the whole village-back, laid bare to notice! It was no matter then, whether the end-wing had lost its interest, or the blinds were stupidly down there. Everything had an interest, everybody became important, the very commonplace of people's ways and doings entered in, gossiping. Was it a new bright dress that Miss Gibbs had got, or only the snow that made it look so—had the bailiff got a grey pony instead of the white one, as he rode up from the bridge, or merely still the same—was his face red with anger, or was it a contrast to the snow? What was old Mr. Dockett doing at his back-

door, smoking at that hour, or was it but the vapour of his wheezy breath? What track of foot-steps, since noon, from the "Blue Pig" Kitchen-door, round the back-way toward the cobbler's garden, were they his—or only Sarah's, for the pairs of winter-shoes he was so long in mending? And the curate, Mr. Webb, had he at last got a black great-coat, or was it still the old shiny one, of Oxford grey—and was he coming that way, or merely going to see that the church was to be duly decorated, the damp kept down by fires in the vestry? Oh! He met Mr. Ashburton at any rate, who had not come up the lane, because of the slides in it, no doubt—and the Squire held for the church of course, for the Squire was anxious about the choristers and their practice.

They had their dresses to attend to, though, in the Grange. "Poor old-fashioned things, to be taken down and made ready, that a single day of Miss Gibbs might serve to alter them—even to make them the size! So, young Mr. Singleton was to be there, the rich brewer's son—the son of the Chelmstone mayor? Lieutenant Singleton, actually! He had contrived, then, to get into the militia—he would of course have his uniform? No fear of his not having had it already. Vulgar—little—fat! Still he was an only son. Was it true that it was Matilda Ashburton he came so much after? Oh, she needn't be so certain of him, though—there was Miss Maggie, tall and pert enough," Jane was sure, "and there might be other people, for all their disadvantages of dress, inclined to tease Matilda. Matilda was good-natured enough—but really silly. She *would* make confidants of people, as if they couldn't expect to be rivals! Yet what were the Ashburtons?—they were understood to be poor too. Of course, or else they wouldn't catch at a young brewer!" But Nugent frowned at such side-talk of Jane's, saying he had no patience with scandal, especially from girls—and went off as if to leave them dull again.

Yet no silence could make it dull to little Lizzy. If she was let prattle her notions freely, without the weight of learning upon her, picking out threads and peeping out, now from this window, now from that—then no kind, quiet, matter-of-fact mother, half thinking of the future, half happy in the present, could help smiling at times, at times joining her conversation; till a wiser sister should elevate it again into forethought about the party. “Hinchbridge never could have been thought to have so many houses—the roof of the ‘Blue Pig’ must surely have got a new attic in it—no, it must have been the branches of those trees that hid it before. Odd, that last winter they hadn’t noticed it—yes, or noticed that the church clock could be seen through an opening, well enough to guess the time. Such a number of things not observed before! When had the Dame-school been begun, where the children were running out making snow-balls? Not last winter. Not till the summer—not very long ago—not till a good while after Dr. Smith came. How odd. Dr. Smith often stopped and spoke to Dame Robins, who used to be so ill off.” That made Lizzy think. “There was Goody Lee, too, with rheumatisms that Sarah said he tried to cure—she had got laces and bobbins and things in her window very lately, as if it were meant to be a shop. Besides, there was soon to be a little post-office, Sarah said. Perhaps at Mrs. Thomson’s, who was licensed for tea and tobacco. How convenient it would be! What a number of poor old people there were, to be sure, for the Christmas dole from the Squire! Would they all take it this time?” she wondered.

Jane laughed contemptuously. “What nonsense!—of course they would.” Their mother could not say: she wished they did not need it.

“Because,” pursued Lizzy, rather pertinaciously, “Sarah thinks it would provoke Doctor Smith—he hates beggars—he wants to keep them from taking charity. Won’t Hinchbridge be changed, Sol says, if he stays long!”

"And who—who, my dear child," asked the mother, suspending her work in some surprise, if not anxiety, "may 'Sol' be?"

While Jane elevated her chin with disdain, Lizzy explained. Since the frequency of Mr. Gimble's visits had ceased, the truth was, that she had considerably made amends to herself by friendship with the Doctor's man. Not that the man had ever given her a drive, or patronizingly gone about the ground with her, allowing her one finger to hold, like the long-backed clerk in her earlier days of confidence; but that she patronized *him*, occasionally getting him to do small gardening jobs under her eye, favouring him with her discourse the while, as had been visible enough to the household within. It was the sole exception to the fellow's general manner, that he was then so docile, so ready, so content to contrive and busy himself at her will, that a remark from him was surprising. "He never said anything else but *that*," said Lizzy, "he always says it. He says it to himself, I think. I think he's perhaps learnt it off by heart."

Changed enough already was Hinchbridge, indeed, by the snow, yet most certainly it was not dull. It was not dull even when the snow began again, snowing for a whole day together; if at a little table of one's own, by the parlour window, one could be content, like Lizzy, to draw copies of lively scenes, pastoral, castellated, marine, or civic; learning to colour, praised for every sign of progress in it, wondering how the dullness can be thought of. While softly steal the gentle flakes to the furred window-sill outside, with its faint blue halo; each a fairy-like shape, a gem, or star, or seed, or spike of down, a crystal, or a tiny plume, or a mote of evanescent magic, adding itself with a whisper to its lost companions; till in a pause one looks out, seeing things transfigured, the radiant apparition of former things, all in one, with the violet phantoms of shade, the crimson

reflections of early sunset. Wishing no longer to copy second-hand pictures, but to imitate the strange loveliness of shape and the soft precision of outline. Just as little Lizzy, rising up cautiously but quickly, not to scare it away, nor to lose it either, put her paper up half ashamed against the glass, trying in spite of its frost-work to take an unfair advantage of the sunset on the end wing, with that crisp wreath of white by the large muffled window opposite, where a robin redbreast had hopped, for the lower frame was raised, so that the blackness looked beautifully out, and the crimsoned gleams of glass made a picture that was positively gorgeous with the snowy eaves, the foamy hedge, the glaring garden-wicket beyond. She dropped her pencil almost despairing, she rubbed with the india-rubber, she put her mouth to the pane and blew, and wiped, and drew again. Why did Lizzy, on a sudden, stand as if petrified, letting paper and pencil fall—then clapping her hands together in surprised delight, with a laugh, a nod, and an exclamation?

An abrupt sound like a pistol-shot close by, of the opposite window closing, at which the robin flew up with a chirp and twitter; just as the faces of Mrs. Smythe and Jane were put beside Lizzy's.

"How stupid of me!" was her first answer to them. "He must have been wanting to feed it—there's the crumbs—there's its little footsteps, like little crosses, all the way, almost! Very likely our old robin, last Christmas!"

"Dr. Smith, she means," said Jane, looking out. "Back already! To leave town before Christmas, for Hinchbridge!"

"He doesn't think it dull, perhaps," said Lizzy, triumphantly. "No wonder. It's snowing again—it'll be dark—to-morrow it won't be the same picture! His face was so red, I didn't know him—he might have been angry, do you think mamma?"

"I hope not," she said. "He must really be a kind-hearted man, Lizzy. Really we should have looked for the robin ourselves."

"I was so busy drawing," Lizzie said. "I didn't even hear the coach horn." And Jane had been, perhaps, engrossed by the niceties of taking down frocks and spencers, with the speculations that accompany them: their mother, as it proved, in thoughts of the London post, probably on account of Ruck and Co.'s silence. "I noticed it," she remarked, quickening her needlework; "it was a good deal later than usual. The roads may have become bad. And the mail has to reach Chichester before we get any good by it."

A night of snow, it is closing in; dark, but all astir with the showering, pouring, ceaseless descent, which makes people gaze out a little anxiously till all inmates are safe housed at home. Then, when Nugent is at length hurried back by it, like a spectre stamping and shaking himself human in the passage, laughing as he follows the candles and tea-tray; Sarah closes the shutters, draws the red curtain, over a spotted, seething blackness which had begun to look terrible. It was circling, whirling, whirring down with a hush and a silence, sifting in with insidious wafture to the door-mat, as if scarce to be locked and bolted out. People would be lost in it, Nugent said. So comfortable, nevertheless, from round the tea-urn—so domestic, warm, and even happy, in collected snugness toward the fire, about the round tea-table—as to temper Mrs. Smythe's satisfaction with apparent gravity. It is almost solemn when she chides Jane for fearing the lane to Hinchbrook will be impassable, and says, "Do not let us be selfish, my dear—think of the persons who may have difficulty in getting home just now. And dear me! when I think of it, it is as well Dr. Smith has returned when he did, else it might not have been possible for days—weeks, perhaps!"

"Is that coachman in *now*?" said Jane: "that chaise-driver, I mean—'tis likelier he is up at the

tavern, drinking! I suppose people from taverns are most in danger."

"Then you're wrong, Miss Jane," was Nugent's assurance, "for if you mean little Solomon, he came in at the gate behind me. For all I know, to be sure, he might have mistaken his way afterwards, and come round to the kitchen! 'Tis at least dull enough to-night by oneself, I think, ma'am, to excuse him?"

"Yes, very dull!" she responded almost with a shiver. "So very dull, indeed, Nugent—I would take no notice of it—no. Sarah can be trusted. Really, it must be lonesome in this weather. It must be even lonesome, don't you think—almost dreary to excess on such a night—for—Dr. Smith himself? A—a—neighbour at least—if we may not say by this time a—an acquaintance!"

The lad shrugged his shoulders, sat silent, and drank his tea with a slight frown. "Oh, so dreary!" echoed little Lizzy, edging nearer. "So dreary, that I'd be afraid. Mightn't you send in to ask him, mamma—to tea—by Sarah? No, Nugent might go—he'd come for Nugent! Or Nugent would stay a little with him, perhaps." "Another night at any rate, possibly?" her mother thought, smiling, yet considerate of Nugent's view. For Nugent's part, he said the old gentleman had newspapers and books; he was scientific, at least professed to be so, though in a rough, vulgarish way. News, science, and books, Nugent said authoritatively, were the best society after all: and what was solitude or weather to a business man, a doctor? Scientific doctors could sit alone with a barometer beside them, and find pleasure in it—alone before a scull, and enjoy it: not that Nugent particularly liked scientific doctors, or doctors of any kind, nor had he for a moment entertained the special offer of Ruck & Co. Most likely, as for Dr. Smith, he was at that moment sitting with a barometer near, a scull not far away: indeed he believed these articles were included among the Doctor's furniture.

The Doctor did not seem to like being pressed upon, either; his circle was different, his habits formed: besides, though a neighbourly acquaintance might be all very well, a visitor and friend was quite another matter. Other visitors and friends must then be open to his acquaintance too.

How much his sister Jane was at one with him on these points! "No"—he "thought it better to leave things as they stood naturally. To the natural course of things, no doubt, he had nothing to say—especially when he himself wasn't there. No—no, mother," exclaimed he kindly, "I don't mean India—perhaps not abroad at all, even. My dear mother, if you are so much set on it, you know—I don't mind saying quietly—privately, mind, Jane, and you too, Liz—that I'll—I'll try, that's to say, to bring myself to—to the *Church*. Ah! I mean it, in fact. I do assure you."

He looked round in a filial, virtuous sort of self-sacrificing style, did Mr. Nugent; and put out his cup to accept of another dish of tea. Which was poured out hurriedly, confusedly, bewilderedly. The over-draught of comfort and joy that Mrs. Smythe received, she took to the full, but in secret.

Snow as it might, the more the better; they could talk and laugh till bed-time, through Nugent's animation. He even graciously looked over Lizzy's pictures, and condescended to say there was something in them—she might prove a first-rate teacher of drawing and painting yet. Nay, he was the only one not to laugh at the high contempt of Lizzy for that climax; when she declared, half-crying, she meant to be a great genius, a painter of brilliant powers like the late Mr. Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds, who painted with oil, on cloth ever so large, and got as much for one picture as would make them all rich!

And said Nugent, as he parted from his mother for the night, by themselves, "Supposing he were to give

in to what you wrote—supposing Ruck & Co. grew as munificent as they're mean—low—sneaking—I *hate the man*. He must have known I wouldn't be a druggist—'twas a studied insult! I wouldn't, after this—after those words besides—I wouldn't go by his help, were it to become as rich as Warren Hastings and as famous as Clive! No, mother—no fear of Ruck & Co.—don't trouble yourself about them either way. The sordid, calculating monster may even take it into his base head to get rid of me, that you may be left at his beggarly terms. But go I shan't. I'm reading hard for Cambridge, whatever Mr. Webb may think. Ruck & Co. indeed. Ruck & Co.!"

CHAPTER X.

MORE CHANGE AND FURTHER CHEERFULNESS.

THE fresh snow-storm all night had been truly inveterate. Helped by a wild winter wind, it had been extraordinarily fierce in the dark, assailing all Hinchbridge as if to take it by force and destroy it, ten thousand strong at least; but in the morning quite pacific and silent. Still as a trance, it was then. The perfect peace and calm, after that war of spectral forces, were under the day's brightened eye most exquisite. People looked forth as if for signs of ravage and of peril escaped, yet were won out to wonder, led and persuaded along to admiration and gladness; but if Christmas was to be Christmas at all, that season, the good folks had a good deal before them in a very short day's time.

It was from an unexpected quarter, certainly, that the sudden spirit came, by which all Hinchbridge was soon animated, till it fell-to and worked like an ant-hive. Young Smythe from the Grange, the tall lad Nugent, came plunging breathless out of somewhere, across wreath and drift, followed by the curate's elder boarder

(who never went home at Christmas, if the mail could have taken him that time); and they rushed straight with a train of little village boys to Mr. Webb's aid, all armed with spades and shovels. The parish seemed to be turning upside down when they fell into it and followed, while Master Nugent was the laughing leader and gay controller. Even to the very deaf dull man who professed to be a victim of rheumatics, and the burly good-humoured miller, and gruff farmer Hoby of Poplar Farm; and finally, all of a sudden, the little cross-grained serving-man, Solomon! He fell to abruptly, with a jerk as if it were irresistibly infectious; going at it with a trowel, then with a hoe, at last with a broad barn-spade, like a quarry-man, like a pioneer, like a monk of St. Bernard, pushing into it and diving down, and going out of sight. All of them in serried order, strenuously clearing the way in bands from the village green, toward the church, down the hollow to meet the Hinchbrook party, or up towards Chelmstone by Chipping Lane—they were indeed a sight to see.

"Seems not so inclined to idleness, after all?" soliloquized Dr. Smith, observing Nugent, his juvenile neighbour. "Somebody said he was, though," answered young Evans, the curate's eldest boarder, who was near—"somebody said it was owing to Hinchbridge—and he heard somebody in particular say only this very morning, I believe, sir, as he was passing somewhere, that all Hinchbridge was tarred with the same stick—all a set of idlers—all so many aimless boys—all on the look-out for doles and charities without working for 'em! Something's come over him, since. I don't understand Smythe exactly. He says he'll be heard of before long—he'll surprise more than one—he'll make a different place of it before he goes! Don't let out that I told, sir—but I know you stop at the Grange, and if I was his friend I'd keep an eye on him. My name's Evans—here's my card, sir! I don't know Mrs. Smythe."

"Thankee, thankee, Mr. Evans," hastily responded the Doctor, signifying some interest in the matter, even an inclination to draw the eldest boarder aside with him.

"If I'd Smythe's talents," said young Evans, looking off at his friend, "if I'd got such a turn for mathematics and field-work, in fact, anything he likes—why, I'd take any sort of regiment and get to be a general in time."

"Indeed—ah!" was the abstracted answer: "you would, would you?"

"Yes, sir. I say, by the bye," added the youth, struck by an idea, "there's a fellow Singleton, the rich brewer's son, that's got a militia-appointment lately, and he's often up at the Squire's. If he's at the party to-night, sir, as it's pretty likely—I'd keep an eye upon him—I'd keep 'em as much as possible from meeting, if I was you!"

"Tut, tut, boy!" was the annoyed rejoinder. "I don't happen to be of the party—nor know the people. Keep an eye upon Singleton too—keep 'em from meeting? One'd think I was to have all the business of the parish on my hands! But why so, pray?"

It was for reasons, Master Evans stated, which it would be dishonourable for him to betray. As to why the reason existed, he was quite ignorant; he hadn't the least guess. Only they were very good reasons; and his countenance had fallen at the information that Dr. Smith was unacquainted with the Ashburtons. "Suppose, Master Evans," suggested Dr. Smith, "that as we're both solitary to-night, it seems—you were to come and share my supper? we could talk matters over. And," he added, laughingly, "we can talk of war, if you like, after I've showed you my peaceful little curiosities?"

Young Evans was really very sorry indeed that he had engaged himself to assist old Mr. Dockett, the parish-clerk, about the church-decking that evening; as

it would be moonlight. After which he had promised Nugent to take a look round the village in his absence, and if there was any snow-balling, to keep it in bounds. Snow-balling of some sort there was certain, Nugent had assured him, to be ; and Nugent's word went far in the village, particularly with the village-boys. Young Evans, as a friend, hinted to the old gentleman that there were Chelmsstone boys getting about, and it might be as well—quite as well upon the whole—to keep indoors. Wherewith, young Evans, nodding in return to his good-bye, out of a load of evergreens, re-entered the village like a moving Christmas-tree.

The early evening had fallen : out of Chipping Lane came down the sound and tumult of the last grand expedient they had hit upon to clear it ; a huge ball it was, gathered at the upper end, then rolled by main strength past Poplar Farm, so that stakes and poles had to be brought to keep it going, till on a sudden it broke away from them like a living thing, tearing up the stones and earth, crushing the young trees, and rushing headlong past the park wall against the old pales, which it levelled as if they were rotten, and drove in beyond the village church like an avalanche upon the village green, pursued by a dozen men and scores of boys. The Curate and Squire started, the party from the Manor House mingled their amusement with slight screams, excited by which there ran forward young Singleton in his new uniform, flourishing some gestures of command and gallant words ; all heightened to aggravation by the abrupt appearance of Bailiff Sloane on his white pony, riding up with a train of the gamekeeper, the farming-men, and the constable. Then it was that a pellet or two of snow began to fly, and some ill-judged threats of the bailiff stirred up the strife ; which reached the verge, when a first-hurt urchin yelled, of perfect war and insurrection. Mothers ran to the scene, fathers looked sullen or swore, while bigger brothers were indiscriminately hurling revenge, and the constable himself was the offended parent.

"Ha! ha!" said the Squire, recoiling from a spatter of the lively missiles. "A very good joke—but has gone far enough, I think!—Nugent, for Heaven's sake get it stopped!—A mere joke, Mr. Sloane. Come, come, sir—perhaps we'd better humour 'em."

"Come, come, Mr. Sloane," entreated the Curate. "I think we had better. The Church is open, sir—really—really, *that* must have had a pebble in it, I fear!" Mr. Sloane was wiping his cheek, with an attempt at fortitude, but allowed himself to be drawn into the churchyard; having already got off his pony. The ladies and all the Ashburton party had taken refuge within.

Mr. Sloane turned and stood stubborn, enraged to the pitch of swearing a very profane oath. He seemed to be looking for some one whom he did not see. Nugent Smythe, aided by young Evans, had sallied out unmolested through the uproar and begun a work behind, a merry work that seemed to draw it all that way and bring back good-humour. They had set-to again with spade and shovel, but this time not destroying, only building. On the cleared space of the green, with its quarry-like store of blocks and slabs, they had called for the general building of some grand structure that was to commemorate the day; and on the huge round ball that had rolled from Chipping Lane, to heap up and mould a giant figure in honour of the opening. Ideas, they were, of Nugent's; and Nugent rose to exultation again in the activity of it: Nugent seemed to revel in his fancies, his sway over every younger mind, his sudden conspicuousness, and influence with the elder; the more especially when he came back to the church-gate and signed to Captain Norris, who brought out the ladies, while young Mr. Singleton's red coat and sword did not hinder some misgiving for him, as he followed with the lame Squire.

"No fear now, Mr. Singleton," said he, pointedly; and Mr. Singleton glared at him. "No fear at all, Mr. Sloane." Mr. Sloane had taken out a note-book, and

marked down something as he eyed young Smythe. He marked down something again, as he looked over his shoulder toward the Grange, whence Dr. Smith had at length appeared, stoutly braving consequences in his manifest anxiety. "Very well, young man," said Mr. Sloane; "you're booked too. I've marked you—I've marked every one that's had a hand in it. *Open*, indeed! It'll be a bad opening for you and your friends, I can tell ye, Master Smythe. But go on—no use drawing back now, mind ye! You're committed!"

The youth laughed. "Very well, if *you* say so, Mr. Sloane," he replied. "Always stick to a thing—eh, Evans?" added he, turning away.

"Of course—of course," rejoined young Evans, cordially. "Whatever it be. You'll turn up a trump, yet, Smythe, my boy. And what's more, I'll stick to you as long as you do it—where's that fellow Singleton? Hope you haven't met him yet—no chance of meeting him, yet? If he *does* provoke you to ask satisfaction, though, and is a gentleman and an officer as he fancies—why, then, as you depend upon me, Nugent, of course I *must*—."

"Hush—hush, can't you!" said Nugent, annoyed; for Dr. Smith was so near that he might have overheard them, while Bailiff Sloane came out with the Curate.

"I tell you what it is, young gentleman," resumed the former, disregarding the Doctor's presence altogether, "from what I've heard, I'll say no more about it, as the lane had to be built up at any rate when the weather opens—to close it for good. So——" "Built up? With brick and mortar!" exclaimed Nugent, staring: "you can't do it. Not if people know, or the Squire don't agree—can he, Mr. Dockett?"

The old parish-clerk, bringing the great cold key in his hand, and coughing, avoided the question: "Use and wont, o' course, Master Nugent, or a prescription o' forty year—which it's very nigh run out. Very nigh. And as to Poplar Farm, it's the Squire's, no doubt—but Sir

Thomas be on terms for it, I hear, Mr. Sloane, sir?" "Certainly," said the bailiff. "And harkye, here, Mr. Nugent, his reverence tells me—just a word with you, sir—come?" He drew the youth aside a little.

"No," replied Nugent, rather loudly. "I don't want any sizarship through Sir Thomas. I'm not going to Cambridge or anywhere else, sir, on charity. Besides, I want to read a little longer at home, Mr. Webb.—What do you say?—a commission through the Mayor's interest!—through Mayor Singleton's, Mr. Sloane! A militia one, no doubt—along with young Singleton, the young brewer, I suppose? Ah! Then I tell *you*, Sloane, my good man, that if *you* were Singleton, just now—psha! no matter what—the truth is, I wish to leave Hinchbridge at my own time, and not to be driven out of it. I'm not going to be driven out of it, either, for reasons of my own. Am I, Evans?" The Curate pressed on his glasses, peering over them in dismay; the bailiff gaped; Dr. Smith gazed. "Not at all—of course not," said young Evans.

"Don't trouble me, Sloane," added Nugent, "and I'll let you alone too. You've no notion what I could do, if I were driven to it. Here, Evans, let's go—I've to dress yet, for a party!" And they walked off together, whistling. On the green, among the piles of snow, at the huge snow-building they had planned, the children of Hinchbridge were merrily at work to imitate a throne, altar, or temple, that might have been mistaken easily enough for a castle or a place of execution: the figure which the boys were busy at, was meant for Buonaparte, yet could very soon have turned to a ludicrous effigy of Sir Thomas, which the sharp frost would harden till a thaw: nor did the bailiff know, what young Evans doubtless observed before leaving, that the same frost was rendering snow-balls harmless as missiles from the dusk, or under cloud of night.

"Fine young cocks, upon my word!" ejaculated the bailiff to Mr. Webb and the clerk. "We'll see what

Sir Thomas says to it.—It's evident, sir, the young blade depends on that lodger or tenant or whatever he is—that person, there, sir," raising his voice as the Doctor came forward with a bow to the Curate. "As for him, he'll not be long—there's a scent come out, sir, there's a nice little fact come out about him, whether he's respectable otherwise or not—however he's got his money—whatever he's doing with it. We're on the track of it—it won't hide! I say, Mister Doctor, I tell ye candidly there's no use trying it any longer. Better be off, sir, and avoid exposures. What's the end of hurting people's feelings when it's sure to come out?"

"What d'ye mean—what d'ye mean, sir?" asked the Doctor, flaming scarlet to his very ears.

"Why, by this time, of course," pursued Sloane seriously, "you can't blind people no longer to *one* thing. And that's your reason for stopping hereabouts—aye, stopping at the Grange, sir—come. Muggops knows it—everybody knows it—all Hinchbridge sees it already. And I put it to his reverence the Curate if he don't know what I mean—this design of yours, Doctor Smith, that you fancy nobody suspects, under cover of politics, forsooth, and dyeries, and reforms, and so on! Stuff, sir." Dr. Smith glanced in surprise at Mr. Webb, who in his turn looked very awkward, beginning to work with his spectacles and reddened too. "I—I—must confess," faltered the Curate, whose slight change of manner towards him the old gentleman had not perhaps previously noticed, nor his recent intermission of pastoral visits to the Rector's widow: "I do confess, sir, that it has penetrated to my knowledge. I was quite unaware, Dr. Smith, of any such feeling on your part, until my mother, Mrs. Deputy Webb, so informed me—and I really do crave pardon if any unguarded expression of mine, sir, regarding the lady, in a general conversation we once had together—down that same lane, you may recollect, sir—should have offended in any way. Dr. Smith has a perfect right, however, Mr. Sloane, I

imagine, so to feel. You will oblige me, Mr. Sloane, by terminating this conversation. By not referring, sir, to me in the matter, pray." Thereat Mr. Webb began to stride away alone.

"Aha," persisted the bailiff, winking at Dr. Smith's bewilderment, in a way that grew less malignant than viciously expressive of confidence, depraved, immoral, liquory from the season. "Aha, Doctor. A perfect right, quotha! Quietly, now—between you and I—well, so you might, perhaps, and no great harm either—but the thing's not in my hands, and Sir Thomas 'll make a regular stir as a magistrate, so soon as he gets hold of t'other business. He don't like your upsetting bumptious ways, as he calls 'em—he's obstinate, is Sir Thomas—he didn't like you on account of politics at first, Doctor, though that was a mistake. Still, he don't like you."

"Don't he?" said the Doctor, very mildly indeed, looking in a similar confidential style to Mr. Sloane. "I'm not aware that I've given him any cause, Mr. Sloane. I've no personal feeling against Sir Thomas Deane. I wish you'd let him know it. I've surely a right, as you reasonably state, to—to——"

"Ah, to look after the widow. Sir Thomas heard it, of course, and had nothing to say against it—except your years, you know, Doctor! Ha! ha! Brisk blood in ye yet, sir—and Mrs. Smythe's young and nice-looking—very nice-looking on the whole!" The bailiff's own mouth seemed to water at the notion, and he affected to lick his lips, nudging Dr. Smith while they looked at each other. "But he didn't know," continued Sloane, "nor he don't know yet—and I daresay it might be kept back from him yet—but what you was a bachelor or a—hey, Doctor, that's the point, you know after all, eh? Or a widower. A *widower or a bachelor*, Dr. Smith, *mark ye!*"

Dr. Smith started like a guilty man. "Who says that?" whispered he, turning his face away. "Come,

though, Mr. Sloane," he added, more briskly, "it's a social occasion, and you and I may be old bachelors at any rate—ha! ha! you know, or widowers either, if we like—for an hour in the 'Deane Arms' here? Over a jug of punch—d'ye say?" They were near the door, and went up into the very room where old Singleton had hobnobbed before with the bailiff. "What's the terms, Mr. Sloane, then—terms of perfect secrecy, of course? And how many more than yourself know it? Come, I'm a business man."

"Clear out of Hinchbridge parish altogether, Doctor, at once," rejoined Sloane, with a horse-laugh. "Before Sir Thomas comes back. It's not so much matter about Chelmstone—you might even drive over in a quiet way, o' the long nights, to the Grange, for all Sir Thomas would hear of it. As to who knows it besides me—well, there's but *one*. One more only as yet, sir, and I don't mind letting out so far. If I say the word to that one, he daren't—daren't for his life go no further. No fear o' that. You won't be able to suck me, Doctor—I'm an old fox. 'Twas a little bird—a little bird and nothing more—an old owl or a—hem—hem. Only, if ye *do* marry her after all, I'd really advise ye, Doctor, to get it managed in a different part of the country altogether, where it can't come to—what's his name's ears, I mean. He might talk, might the owl, if it was but in his sleep, you know. It's a disagreeable business, Doctor, is bigamy!"

"Bigamy?" repeated the Doctor, eyeing him. "Well—I'll think over it. I'll either leave, as you say—or I'll wait till my wife dies, or—not marry the widow."

"Just so," said Sloane, steadily. "But I'd advise the first. All my business is to save a row with Sir Thomas, Doctor, or trouble to him. As for you and your old Sing—a—a—the dyery, I mean—that's to say the Chelmstone folks—he may—*they* may do what they like, I tell ye. Can't do anything—can't stir in it, Doctor, if you only leave."

"If not?" said the Doctor, temporizing.

"Well—then it's war. Regular war," returned the bailiff. "When Sir Thomas comes back, it's war. A fair warning."

"I'll think over it, Mr. Sloane," was the final declaration, as Dr. Smith took his leave to walk homeward by the frosty moonlight.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DOCTOR'S CHRISTMAS EVE.

"OLD blackguard!" broke out Dr. Smith at last, from his after-dinner reverie, seated alone in his spacious old chambers at the Grange. "And there's a worse old criminal somewhere, that's plain. Where is he—which is to turn out the worst?—is the question. Ho, ho, Mr. Sloane—there's a set of us, it seems! I'm a designing old, foolish, infatuated villain, no doubt—fancying I was to be left at peace, too, to see my way. Must give in at last, must I—to be allowed to manage it quietly, eh?—on the sly, as it were, out of sight of Sir Thomas. An exceedingly virtuous and moral old boy, Sir Thomas, I suppose—I mustn't dare to fight with him, I see."

Springing up from his seat with a half-assumed guffaw, he paced his secluded sitting-room to and fro with rapid strides: pretending amusement yet, even to himself, till it would do no longer. Dr. Smith stood still, and sighed deeply.

"Why not have been open and straightforward, after all!" he muttered. "There's a perfect maze got gathered out of it all, between us, that can't be broken through of a sudden. Absurd as it seems—mere boy's play—why, Heaven only knows what might come out of a trifle at any moment, to blast everything and make it a curse for life! Raise the very dead, in fact, to reproach one! To vow vengeance against one—to swear no forgiveness and

haunt one with it—as—as one or other of us did in life! I hope—I hope to Heaven it was not *me*! No. No. James! James! O James—little curly-headed Jem, with your pinafore and spelling-book, come in and say it! Surely it was not *me*—though you *did* change after?” He even groaned. He stood and looked toward the dusky closet-doorway, as if for a step, for an appearance, for a whisper; though none came. If the Grange had been haunted by that apparition, it seemed he would have welcomed it; and feared no other. Turning towards those old rude patriarchal representations which the carved mantelpiece displayed, he leaned his forehead there to pore over them; yet they were unchanging and dumb, they did not communicate with him: nor did the old square Bible lying near them serve better than, though there were spectacles in it to mark a place, and dog’s ears here and there that showed it long in use; more-over he looked into it to gaze at a fly-leaf with family names. Two names, but two; his own first, after the marriage-record of the parents: and the book had a Russia-leather cover, as if very precious. But Christmas Eve was to the Doctor, doubtless, being a Dissenter, no special evening; nor would the day to follow be more sacred in proportion than its eve required to be festive. Its outer stillness did indeed draw him to listen with some care, but as yet there were neither voices, steps, nor any other disturbance or alarm.

“What—fly, forsooth?” the Doctor ejaculated at length, pacing again, with no slight irony of meaning this time. “And drive over quietly of the long nights while they last, to *see her*! You don’t know, Mr. Sloane, what affection is—love—*love*, sir! How could I notice all that went on *then*—and come to know everything—and try to get this boy—that boy, *aha*! swept from my path! And go he must—but it’s not fast enough for my taste, with that Curate and that Squire, and Heaven knows who else! I’d have to know all Hinchbridge, I see—aye, and manage the thing out of it

all, unless—unless I adopted him, to be sure, at once, making him my expectant and heir apparent and—and—time-serving, fawning, dependent, beggarly *step-son*? Eh, bailiff? Come, yes,” he added, “*was let it be!* When Sir Thomas comes back. And then—ha! ha! ha! what if I *did* even offer to cast in my lot with the fair widow!

“How did the little bird come to know so much?—I knew it could only have been through Solomon or through my letters—my private letters. Only some of ‘em. Well? None of the sort here, at any rate—none in that particular hand—unless Solomon’s appropriated it forthwith! As he has a right, of course—a perfect right to do. But not likely, from previous manifestations, I should say—not likely he’s taken a sudden fit of connubial fondness for the poor woman, his wife—not more likely, even, than that the fellow should breathe a whisper on that point to any one but myself, much less foist it upon *me*. He’s not within call, of course, not within chance of hearing, if the bell were anything short of a steeple one, or a tocsin for fire. When he does come in, Muggops’s ale will have muddled him, though he daren’t venture again, I hope, on aught stronger.”

So reconciling himself to patience, Dr. Smith no longer regarded with suspicion, at any rate, the arrangements for his convenience so providently and almost kindly made by Solomon. He took the articles of easier dress from the warmth of the fire, which he re-stirred, placing the ready kettle upon it as it had evidently been before, and mingling in preparation for hot water the other ingredients of a cheerful draught; then examined his letters again, but opened them with ordinary interest, and read them all cursorily. The newspapers were but dry, dull with Christmas idling; no damp or creases in them, nor yet any presumptuous crumplings or soiling, but still excessively destitute, at that season, of a business activity, an enterprising and world-wide stir.

While he thought of it all, the usual slight sound of

Solomon's modest latch-key attracted his master's ear ; and the latter grew aware that, early as it yet was, Solomon was gently presenting himself within call at the foot of the staircase ere he went up ; perhaps noiselessly looking in at the light, to see or inquire if anything more was wanted, that he might go to bed, or more probably, that evening, go out again. Very thoughtful of Solomon, and as Dr. Smith chanced to want him, he called without turning his head. It was only Sarah Flake, however, who rather reluctantly answered. Solomon was not within, she was able most respectfully to inform him ; but if Solomon were wanted, she could perhaps get him to know—get him brought to come, in course.

"Very well, I want him," said Dr. Smith, somewhat gruffly. "Let him lose no time, either, wherever he is. If he must go back, why," and his voice relented a little, "he may. It's not so far to the tavern. And I'd rather see him, Mistress a—a—I forget your name—I'd rather see him at present while he's collected—quite collected, you understand ?" Sarah understood : Sarah even approved briefly ; and Sarah, cheerfully agreeing that it was not far, and he might go back again if inclined (she hoped without danger of excess), undertook the message herself most obligingly.

Not remarkably soon, but in a remarkably collected and unmuddled state, Solomon came in and made himself obvious. He was the more in his cross-grained mood ; besides that he saw the matter to be of some gravity, being looked at, and bid shut the door. "Well ?" said he, coming back again, with only the dull eye to meet Dr. Smith's, as the latter took off his spectacles. The vivid one was shy of him, taking side glances from about the room, over the open letters, towards another which Dr. Smith had in his hand, taken from a locked bureau before Solomon entered. "If it's any more about the old business, Mr. Smith, it's no use asking at me. Don't want to read them. Keep them

yourself, Doctor. I've got enough. I can read 'em over if I like."

"It's only an old one, Sol," said his master re-assuringly. "I took it out for a purpose, only concerning myself. I wanted to know if you happened to have any of the same covers, addressed to me in town, but not come through any post, with stamp-marks on it—not yet re-directed, Sol, from the counting-house—so that if I enclosed it to 'em from here, you know, with my express orders, they could use it at any time—I mentioned, on the outside of some letter to *me*. Not to you at all. You can tear off any written leaf, with dates, signature, in short, all the letter itself. It's necessary, indeed—I've seen several such, I think—and you ought, you really ought, Sol, at least to keep them."

"So I do," was the dry answer. "I'll bring a cover, and welcome. They musn't forward any more, though, through the post. I see what it is, Doctor—it's a good notion, if the post-missus have been prying?"

"It's not a post-master, then?" said Dr. Smith. "What sort of person may she be—whose tenant or neighbour, or that kind of thing? I don't accuse or even suspect her, mind—and recollect, Sol, you don't stir in this till I ask you—I don't need it. I can trust you, I know, in my interest, just as well as *you*——"

"As I can *you*, Mr. Smith," was his man's completion of the sentence. "She's a greengrocer—decentish old quiet body, with a deaf-and-dumb son to help her. Plenty of low neighbours. One landlord. Same landlord as to most of 'em. Same landlord you've got yourself, Doctor, at the dyery. He's the brewer. He's the mayor. He's prying. He don't seem to like you so well as the rent. Perhaps he don't like me so well as you. There's too many tipstiffs about him to my fancy, and my interest is, not to have 'em poking into any letters of mine. Even if it was for a trap. I've got just one correspondent, and if I send answers, it's by

means of your folks, governor, from abroad—different places—Russia sometimes, or Smyrna, wherever the spot of business may be—anywhere there's supercargoes or agents going out. It's a good while since I was home at No. 4, Brent's Alley, Aaron's Road, Houndsditch—but I'm going. She don't just know I stop at the Grangery, here." The fellow did not grin in the least, nor wink: he was rather grave than otherwise.

"Solomon," observed the Doctor, after a pause, "I don't want to interfere in family matters. You were safer, and of more use to me, in the country—where I certainly could not have got on without some one in your place. Your wife's allowance is regularly made, and drawn by her. She seems comfortable, so far as that goes, and I'm sure she's well behaved—from what I couldn't help seeing, in fact, she must be a model of patience and affection—I'd almost say devotion! Not near your own age, I should say!"

"No. Youngish," replied the husband, in an approving manner. "Not bad-looking either, when I was last home."

"I fancied from inquiries made by her," continued Dr. Smith, seriously, "not to speak of these expressions in the letters—that she must be growing anxious—eager, a little?"

"Well," was the reply, inclining to self-defence, "it's natural, perhaps. Women are fools. I'm not dead, though. I'm all right. I wrote according to your desire, sir, saying you objected to my name being Joshua, same as yours—a purser's-name it *was*, too, and she pretty well knew it. Requiring to be a foreign letter, no doubt, she couldn't well have got it yet. But, Solomon or not, there won't be any more of hers forwarded, if ye please. Can pick 'em up myself in Town, if they lie till called for."

"Tell me one thing, Solomon," said his master, with friendly concern. "It is quite possible, you know, though no more of these letters be sent here, that some

inquisitive friend of my own, in anxiety for my good, may have already taken a note of the place they come from, and take it into his wise head to inform her how matters stand, as he fancies. She might naturally be a little irritated, don't you think, and if she knows too much—knows, my good fellow, what I don't know and never demanded you should confess—why—then—mightn't there be a danger of things being brought up again—some former charge against you, or crime, or something? No, Solomon, no," exclaimed the old gentleman, putting up his hand in deprecation, "I don't want, I tell you, to be your father-confessor—we never wanted to hear it—we took you in and employed you without stipulation of the kind—you might have been guilty, for all we knew. Who hasn't? We only trusted, and haven't found to the contrary—that you'd never commit any crime again. I believe you've been grateful—very likely you hadn't had fair play before—you had disadvantages and temptations—no, no, man, no confessions to me! Make 'em elsewhere—in secret—you ought to know where, Solomon."

"I wasn't going to confess any crime," said Solomon, gloomily looking down. "I was—innocent—of the one that was found out."

"So we all are," remarked Dr. Smith, gravely. "It's what's not found out, I suppose, we're guilty of?"

"The jury said it. The judge said it. All the papers said it," persisted his servant. "What's more, the man that ought to have owned to it was strung up after—and she knows it, because I told her before I bought the ring. Bless ye, Doctor, if I'd said I was guilty instead, 'twould have been all one. No. She'd only take the Chichester stage and come down here. Not being Russia, nor Smyrna, of course. I'd soon enough explain matters. Time wasn't out, at any rate, for the last trip abroad on business. If I hadn't been here, I'd have been there. Then the dyery business and so on, Mr. Smith, you know, sir, it required keeping quiet a bit. It's making money

already.—Going to give it up, Doctor? 'Cause I'm afraid if Rachel comes down, I'd have to live with her till we shifted out again back to Houndsditch—or else I cut and hooked it altogether. As to stopping at home yonder, in Aaron's Road—it's what I can't do and—and *daren't*. Daren't and won't. That's it. Now it's out, Mr. Smith." And as Solomon resolutely faced his master on that point, he was at the same time scared and uneasy at the thought.

"Why, what the deuce, man?" asked the latter with impatience. "You're not afraid of her, it seems—she's evidently far from a vixen or a termagant—you even appear to like her well enough—and as for your age, or the effect of a year or two's absence on your looks, that don't seem to matter. Why can't you stay with her in Town—hang it, I thought you liked Town particularly! From a tavern or a tea-garden to a theatre and a circus, bless me if I ever knew a man that relished them better—a fellow more likely to be the spirit of 'em! Quite at home there, if I mistake not, and plenty of acquaintances about them?"

"Well, not in female company, sir," responded Solomon, wincing. "It's too gay. It's apt to put 'em up to things. It's not a moral tendency, I've heard—and I'm not inclined to gay women, nor loose ones. Never was, whatever else I might be. Might be owing to an earlyish marriage—the first one, I mean. But she's dead a long time ago."

"Of course, of course, Sol," interposed the master. "I really had no notion, though, of your persuasive powers. It ought to give courage to an old bachelor like myself."

"I like 'em domestic, sir," was Solomon's thoughtful addition, as he contemplated Dr. Smith with a shade of sentiment. "I mayn't be it myself, but I like it. When they get gadding and poking about, near each other, they draw somehow together. Besides, Doctor, it's the dress or something, but there's always attention attracted to

married men when they're with ye. Houndsditch's too conspicuous—though I don't know the people myself, and I an't of the persuasion, of course."

His master could not but smile corroboration at the idea ; for no persuasion, ceremony, or name of any kind, had ever appeared to claim his nondescript follower ; the "Christian"-name being merely a requisite change from that adopted by him in compliment to his patron ; the very Oriental views of female propriety were accountable for, by Smyrneses if not Russian missions. He had confessedly been at sea too ; he had with equal candour allowed that he was once on the dramatic stage. "There's acquaintances of mine come about Houndsditch," he now concluded, "looking after fancy-dresses, or cheap clothes, or properties—or selling shells and foreign curiosities. They're well enough themselves—but they're not what I'm inclined to introduce in the family." Really, he looked moral—so much more moral than Dr. Smith felt himself, that he had earnest hopes of Solomon yet. If Solomon could be brought, like himself, to settle down, and possibly yet have what it seemed he had not—a family in the strictest sense of that term—what might the man not be still, ere he died ? On certain eves and nights, do what we may, solemnities will press upon us in the pause—solemnities of change and hope, of mingled awe and pleasure, of frost and winter and moonlight, silence and solitude, with death, birth, and marriage.

"Solomon!" exclaimed the Doctor suddenly, "this is very dreary. Open the shutters and pull up the blinds—let in that moonshine. What sound is that—eh?"

"Only the waits," said Solomon, from the window. And then they both heard the distant music, coming nearer from the Squire's, to visit the parsonage and all the better houses till they reached the village ; without taking money or price, for they did not come inside the gates, as the gentry paid them, or they were paid by the parish. Rude, artless, quaint notes, even after the tuning of the instruments was done ; shakily quavering, or rashly

flourishing into variations, yet at times set off by the awkward foil of a hoarse voice, that could not be hindered from a sort of harmony, till the simple old air became by itself melodious, softly fading off, sweetly dying away, more sacred to remember than to hear. Solomon leered round, for he knew the very men; they had freshened and supported themselves at not a few porches or back-court doors, and were hurrying up to the "Blue Pig." But the Doctor was listening still, singularly averted and silent.

"Solomon," said he, not looking at him yet, "if I were to settle down, now—here—*here*, Sol—where they seem to think, old as I am, there might be a chance for me with—with—the—the widow, in short—our neighbour—Mrs. Smythe—a—a—your wife might like it, you know. If Houndsditch be the only objection, would you not stay with her *here*? I'll settle something comfortable on both of you. A country place is as strange to Londoners—never in the country in their lives, perhaps—as theatres or fireworks, or Vauxhall itself. Look at the snow—look at the scandalous little place, even, from t'other window, with its back to the moonlight! Come, *you* shall have your regular town-journeys—stop in it sometimes—have your range of it—and *free* too! Stay by me, under my knowledge, only. Is't a bargain?"

"The—the widow—Missus Smythe?" Solomon had mechanically repeated, staring at him. "If *you* was to—to marry, Doctor! *Well!*"

"Ah. Well," said the Doctor, firmly surveying the exterior prospect. And they stood gazing at it together. The cold, keen moon shot her radiance needle-like from a hollow vastness of steel-blue sky, and was drawn up curiously, as if her contracted disk became an eye, noticing the little place in its odd white masquerade. With all those quick-twinkling, half-hidden eyes from over her shoulder, and the intentness of piercing glances around, and the gleamings of the very forms of heedless constellations opposite, that yet had moved and changed

"That's it, Mr. Smith. And at present, if it's all the same to you, I'd as soon not go to any Christmases till she's here. No saying by Easter, ye know, sir—or at any rate, next St. Barnabas or Trinity, if I settle—but what there might be changes. Life's uncertain, governor—and it's safer. Safer, somehow." Why it was that at these remarks of Solomon from the shadowy passage, there came a slight shudder of repugnance and horror over Dr. Smith, remembering these calendar names as sacred in his youth—it were hard to say. He held out his candle and looked at the man. "Solomon," said he, suspiciously, "have a care, my good fellow. Now I think of it, there mayn't appear much danger to you from the kitchen next door—nor, for that matter, to the other party—but be careful. We're strange unaccountable creatures, all of us, I think—none more so, you see, than myself, Solomon! Who'd have thought, that knew *me*, now, of my being led into—all this sort of thing—aye, and accused besides as I am—so keep her on her guard, harkye. No more mistakes, you understand? The woman ain't in the dark as to your position, I trust—your married state, d'ye hear, sirrah?"

"I hear," at length answered a remote voice. "All right. Before settling down, might perhaps as well be broken to her?"

"Certainly—certainly—long before it," said the Doctor, "don't for another moment expose yourself to the charge—or worse, the risk—of wishing to commit bigamy and be—yes, Sol—*transported*!" He was departing upward, and as he said the latter part to himself, he only laughed. The less wonder, therefore, that no answer was returned; for Solomon had in all probability gone. It was when Dr. Smith was closing his bed-room door behind him, that he could have fancied a mere echo rose to it, half-gasping, half laughing back, at last, like "No. Great GUM—*no*! Never. Catch me." Solomon's own uncouth, heathen whisper, or else the strong impression of Solomon's wary disposition and odd conduct,

it must undoubtedly have been ; though the uncertainty as to which it really was, at the moment, imparted rather an unpleasant thrill.

"No—no, my man," still did Dr. Smith find himself echoing again by the moonlit window, as if it were an oppression scarce to be got rid of, even there—"there are darker deeds than that, which you're likelier to have done—had to do with, at least. It might be as well, perhaps, to drop the creature, and be—done with him?—Yet—why, with the sting out of his venom—poor toothless dog—harmless with *me*, in fact—no, there's a darker fate than transportation for life, than hanging itself, that must be in store at this rate for him. Aye, aye; might have been—may be—for *who* else, old monster, here? For all you can do at this moment, either—sitting powerless—looking out—listening, only, to hear her all safe—to count 'em in! If one idle young prodigal of hers gets into some foolish scrape—loses his patrons—ruins his prospects—turns out a shabby billiard-playing sneak and profligate for life—ha? Would she ever look at me afterwards, d'ye think? As if I could have helped it, sitting here—or wouldn't have pushed it on, any other way! Why, it's easy enough to prevent beggary—starvation—ruin—the very streets, it might be—ah, poor Sol! It's nothing even to fight Sir Thomas—reform Hinchbridge—revolutionize the whole parish and neighbouring borough—and aha! lay a nice trap for old Singleton! But by gosh! to manage this lad's removal out of my way without an explosion or something—to find out what would carry him off pleasantly—to get at the springs of the business, and work 'em with a knowledge—*why* he stays to quarrel with young Singleton? It passes me! Something bold and decided must be done—that's clear. And first—first——"

Hallo—hush! Voices distinctly coming through the hollow cold, and tingling back again. It was the party from the Squire's at last. Dr. Smith stealthily raised his high end-window, with the blind down; and with a tra-

velling-cap and comforter on, gazed out and listened. The colossal Curate first, with Mrs. Smythe upon his arm; he carefully and even tenderly stooping to keep her feet cautious of the snow; yet a hopeless rival of Dr. Smith's, as the latter then beheld, so clearly that he felt less surprise at the now gracious talkativeness of the Curate's mother from behind. Stiff old Mrs. Deputy Webb, in her close bonnet of lilac silk with a great ribbed hood-like back to it, and creaking, rustling robes beneath, and loud pattens, she allowed young Smythe to walk by her, carrying a strange box for her, but leaving herself unimpeded; and in proportion as she was gracious to the Rector's widow, she seemed to contemplate the end wing of the Grange, and gaze up at it when they stopped at the gate. Plenty of shrill loud talk from her, as if Mrs. Smythe had been deaf, to tell "what a pleasant, merry, social, really appropriate party it had been, and everybody so well behaved, down to the youngest of the young folks. Fine old Christmas music, that of the Squire's favourite sort, at which Mr. Nugent and Miss Margaret Ashburton had been so successful together;" as if nobody had known it. "Very proper, also, the conduct of Mr. Nugent, considering the circumstances; when at the dancing, though deprived of his musical partner, by, certainly, a most forward piece of conduct in young Mr. Singleton, he had shown so cheerful a temper. But not so, the behaviour of young Mr. Singleton throughout the evening. Really, young Mr. Singleton must have been indulging too freely at table, to attempt such a manifest impropriety towards any young lady in particular, after the racketting in general was over. No—even mistletoe under the chandelier could not excuse it—racketting in young folks could not excuse it—it was most ill-bred of young Mr. Singleton, certainly. Before they parted, she meant to let him perceive her mind on it."

They were waiting at the gate a little for the others. There was a little more talk in the frosty air, while they

gathered and parted; but the front door was soon reached and shut again. The house was close, still, secret; the keen chill moonlight whitening the white window blinds, where candle-lights went up the staircase, toward the icicles that jagged the snowy eaves, gleaming green. Even if Dr. Smith could have been an eavesdropper all round, how little would such fragmentary disclosures have helped him! It was inside those fastened parlour-shutters, opposite him, that the truth lay.

After Christmas, when church-going was over, and the thaw began, everything and everybody seemed to be hurrying back to action; as if the snow, once melted, had been but a metaphor, and the snow-ball that rolled out of Chipping Lane a symbol merely. Things melted out and thawed themselves into life and sound, getting abroad and re-echoing, like the frozen noises of Munchausen's horn. Bailiff Sloane was in a hurry to ride about and get something particular begun, before Sir Thomas should hurry to come back from Kent and from Town; the gamekeeper and his assistants had been hurried and bothered too, by things that drove in the same direction. People who ventured up Chipping Lane were in a hurry; or if they stealthily came down it; and Dick Cox too, when, in his militia coat, with a musket from drill, he professed to be only on his way home or to Muggops's. Also Joe Muggops bustled. The Curate was actively pastoral, except in visits at the Grange. Even the Squire busied himself out of doors; for Poplar Farm was a part of his property, and he was having it surveyed under a new offer to purchase. Mayor Singleton was industriously brewing, and sitting in council, and ruling the borough of Chelmstone. And all, in short, was astir before Sir Thomas came back.

CHAPTER XII.

SIR THOMAS BACK.

"To—to—to be pupp—to be plain, I say, gentlemen,"—stuttered Sir Thomas Deane, out of breath and purple with excitement, "I tell ye I—damme—I wont tolerate it!" It was to the quorum of brother justices he spoke, at their very first meeting in Chelmstone: which consisted of himself, the Chelmstone Rector, and Squire Ashburton; with a scared clerk at the table in front, keeping down his head and affecting to transcribe the notes of a game-case just concluded, while the key-hole of the door was undoubtedly darkened by the ear of the court-officer outside. The sound of the baronet's vehemence was the more compelling, in that he had set out from an excessive calm—from a first statement that personal grounds did not influence him, that he viewed the present matter in a purely magisterial light, and wanted it gone into for public ends. He had been unusually accessible, too, as regarded the game-case, to Mr. Ashburton's lenient pleading for mitigation of fine; the offence being a first one, on Mr. Ashburton's own property, and, after all, doubtful, with the excuse of ignorance about the law. A previous case or two, of drunken conduct, wife-desertion, affiliation, and profane swearing, had been rather mildly dealt with at the instance of the Rector against both of them; for the Rector had his parochial capacity to be severe in. In all these the baronet had made unwonted concessions in a half-abstracted way: so full was he, probably, of the graver affair he had reserved for their more private audience; so much the better entitled to claim their friendly co-operation. But in spite of all, this piece of disinterested public business had so wrought him up as he spoke of it, and inflamed and swollen and half-choked him, that, till he got out an oath, the others were chiefly alarmed on his own account.

As soon as Sir Thomas swore, there was no fear of

him in that respect. The moment he hit upon his first oath, the agitated clerk found relief, and could really write again without dread at its being so long of coming; and the door-keyhole began to let in the light again. It was a safety-valve that not only cleared his speech, but, when two or three more had followed it on the ascending scale, enabled his drift to be understood, and grow forcible enough to let him sit down again, with an overwhelming continuance of the subject. "*We cannot tolerate it, I should say, gentlemen, as representing the cause of order in this country, and bearing His Most Sacred Majesty's commission. It must be put down and made an example of, and if possible summarily convicted and punished as a scandalous instigation—as an incentive and a conspiracy, sir—under the Illegal Association Act, I should say, or the Mendicity and Parochial, if not the False Pretences or the Foreign Refugee provision—and I undertake to say that this present extraordinary increase of the petty offence roll and infraction of the game-and-trespass law has got something particular to do with it! Something deuced particular to do with it, gentlemen, I say! That's my public opinion as a magistrate!*"

"It is entitled to great weight, Sir Thomas," accorded the smooth Rector, with an oily soothing, "very great weight indeed, Sir Thomas Deane."

"It certainly deserves consideration," the Squire assented, hastily using his pocket-handkerchief, and looking aside at some acts of Parliament and "Blue Books." "I shall carefully go over the acts you mention at home. I do think there is evidence of a slight disposition in the neighbourhood, lately, to take advantage of such things. Besides, I am of opinion, privately speaking, that the—the person referred to could find much more suitable accommodation in Chelmsstone, here—if, as there is reason to wish, another gentleman were to——"

"Gentleman d'ye call him, Squire—gentleman, did I hear?" was the old baronet's impatient question, as he

turned his ear and hand that way with a severe irony, his eye fixed meanwhile on the Rector.

"He! he! he! Gentleman, indeed!" the latter responded, tittering confidentially across, till Sir Thomas and he laughed loudly together: "*Well!*" With that the Rector made a compassionate sign of apology for Mr. Ashburton, without his notice, as much as to say it was his infirmity to halt and hesitate, to immerse himself in bookish refinements and considerations.

"By Jove, it's too fine for *me*, Rector!" neighed the old baronet: "it's too nice, by —! For my part, if the infernal old blackguard's caught tripping in *my* bounds, curse me if I don't trounce him—I'll run him to earth and dig him out! Yoicks—yoicks! Tally-ho! Worry him! Off with the brush—to the dogs with the carrion—that's my motto off the bench! That's my private judgment. Hallo—d'ye mean to gainsay it, eh? Let him get to cover in Chelmstone, forsooth?"

"Not for a moment—by no means, the Dissenting cur!" cried the Rector. "Stay a little, Sir Thomas—there's the Mayor and I to put our heads together. Singleton's ashamed about that lease to him—only wants a chance. But I'll see him about it. Depend upon it we'll close that before long, and run him over country—without so much as a drain or an old woman's coal-cellar left open!"

"Whew! I know—I know," said Sir Thomas, with a wink. "It may be vermin after all, which we'll nail to a barn-door, sir! S't—let him steal out, perhaps—caught napping, eh? Or drawn to bait. The brewer's a sly mole—if he's not just a trapper. Might be a decoy-duck? Ha! ha! ha! Should'nt wonder. And as to Hinchbridge for the most part, it's the Squire's own affair if he draws his rents."

"The Grange, Sir Thomas," answered Mr. Ashburton, looking up somewhat gravely, with a slight colour, "is not my property. It belongs, you recollect, to—to the old

Cloynes, the family that left us many years ago, and were almost supposed—I mean might have been supposed—extinct.” He had taken his turn of hesitation, and looked a little pale as the baronet and Rector eyed him. “Besides, this Dr. Smith is a mere sub-tenant there. By the way, indeed, as we ride home together, Sir Thomas, I have a suggestion that has occurred to me—a very simple expedient, in fact, to propose.”

“Oh—oh—if that’s the case, we’ll go, then,” was the ready rejoinder, while Sir Thomas became all cordial.

“You’ll come round in time, Squire. If you’d only agree to *preserve*, man. You’d soon ride to the hounds. I’ll not believe it’s for the crops’ sake, or niggardliness, or even your—anything else, that’s to say, but notions of yours. Well—come—what about this d——d old impudent skunk of a Radical sugar-baker, though?” They were riding homeward at leisure on the Hinchbridge road, and Mr. Ashburton proceeded quietly to state his views upon the point.

He thought it really better, perhaps safer, to take no violent course of action against the stranger; not to irritate, in fact, a temper said to be stubborn as well as choleric. At which Sir Thomas Deane recalled his swelling notice from subject things around, or from humble by-passers, to survey the Squire very sharply; not beginning merely to puff, but to snort. The Squire meant, however, that in order to dislodge the old person with certainty, caution must be used. Some consideration also might be due to the feelings of a very worthy lady, the occupant of the house concerned, a Mrs. Smythe, widow of the late respected and learned Rector of Notley; by whom any needless difficulty or disturbance must be first and most strongly felt. But there was a method, the very easiest and simplest possible, of which the Squire had not before thought in this light; though otherwise desirable to his own family, while on their part at once available in such circumstances, when a single word to Mrs. Smythe in a friendly way would

effect the object. It was Captain Norris who was most desirous of so convenient a residence as the spare portion of the Grange; and for Captain Norris—a far more advisable, satisfactory, profitable, and permanent sub-tenant—that single friendly word should forthwith, by Mrs. Ashburton in person, be spoken. Then whatever might be done in Chelmstone, at all events Hinchbridge village and parish would be clear of Dr. Smith, and guiltless of his character or designs: for there was no other house to be got there for love or money. Even if he wanted to build one, there was no ground. Unless he could get it from one of three exclusive proprietors—Sir Thomas himself, the Squire himself, and—and the old Cloynes. Their one sole heir, that was to say.

So the baronet unbristled himself, and if not wholly smoothed, it was because he might have preferred a little chance of opposition from the old scoundrel. He endeavoured to look propitiated, yet still bore a resemblance to old King Ahab, about Naboth's vineyard. "Aha, these Cloynes?" he said. "You've mentioned 'em twice, Ashburton. Damme, it's like a ghost. They're dead or worse. But who's this Smythe—eh—Miss Smythe—no relation of the old villain, I hope?"

Mr. Ashburton gladly hastened to the subject of the Smythes. No—no—certainly not. A different name—highly respectable, though in straitened circumstances. The truth being, that "Smith" was shrewdly suspected as an assumed name of the equivocal individual in question. He might now take that opportunity of commending the late Rector's widow and orphan family to Sir Thomas's favourable notice, as a most deserving family indeed.

"D'ye say so—d'ye say so? A deserving family—straitened too—very likely pinched to this sort of thing! Of course, of course—must be considerate a little, eh, Squire? Reduced—a lady, really! Circumstances, too? why, hang it, sir—we must do something, both of us. If a fifty-pound note or so, for my share—or,

stay—I forget you’re tight yourself—I’ll say a couple of ‘em, though perhaps I haven’t as much about me—but they’re at your service, Ashburton, as soon as I can send over your distance, you know, from the Hall. Mightn’t be the thing—delicacy and so on—in a direct way?”

Mr. Ashburton, with a half smile, though once or twice flushed before, rather thought they couldn’t talk of any money assistance.

“Well, if you think t’other matter oughtn’t to be pressed at present,” blurted out Sir Thomas, confusedly, “if they’re to lose by it—any danger of an action, you know—’d let it alone a while! After all, *rot* the fellow! What is he? A low hunk—a cur—I’ll make Sloane offer him room, by George! for a shop. I’ll employ him myself, by ——! What d’ye say? I don’t like law, Squire—had enough of it, confound it, and that devil of a suit of mine isn’t out of Chancery yet, nor half-way through, I’m afraid.” He fidgeted in the saddle, and made his horse start with the spur, while Mr. Ashburton winced also. “You’ve had a worse dose yourself, Ashburton—at least your poor father had.”

But Mr. Ashburton assured him there need be no fear of that kind for Mrs. Smythe. There *was* a way, certainly, of rendering her a service in return. Through her son, a fine youth, of the most brilliant parts; a young gentleman of merit, intended for the Church. “You have several livings in your gift, I believe, Sir Thomas,—any one of which promised to my young friend, Nugent, would most undoubtedly secure his future career. His capacity is such ——”

“Your word’s enough—shall have one—shall have the very first that opens,” said the baronet. “To be sure—a youth of merit, eh? Brilliant parts! Any relation of the Nugents in Surrey?—What—what, d’ye tell me so? Take orders? Undoubtedly—sooner the better—no class I respect more, sir, than the clergy. Let’s see which of ‘em’s likely to drop off—there’s old Brookley of Higgam,

over at my place in Kent—he's the oldest, I dare say. Tough old blockhead, no doubt—still able for his bottle after dinner. But he keeps a curate I suppose—could no more perform than a rotten hedge-stake, himself—and he'd put in my butler if I asked him. Hang it, Squire, that's the very thing—we'll put in this young fellow to wait for him at any rate—*memento mori*, as we used to say at school, out of Horace, if I mistake not? Ha! ha! yes, a good joke! The old rook has actually forgot to hop off, I do believe, but the curate 'll jog his memory. Ho! ho! ho! And *you* remind *me*, Ashburton—you've my word for it. Here's the lodge-gate, though—but harkye, you know, it's understood this Mrs. Nugent keeps faith with me in turn. Depends on her, you say—and I'm serious about the blackguard, confound him! May be a whim, hang it! but it's annoying—it haunts me, by George! Almost thought that carriage coming out of the drive, yonder, with the yellow body, was that infernal chaise of his! Deuced glad it's not. Puts me beyond myself, by —!"

"I had something to talk of, Sir Thomas," remarked the Squire, offering to ride in along with him, "more nearly concerning myself. About that farm of mine—unless you have given up all thoughts of it?"

"I'll ride round your way," was the answer, "to the other lodge. There's something to see—to that way at any rate. Um—well—about Poplar Farm," pursued the baronet, as they passed the "Deane Arms" to enter the village, "on the whole, I don't care about it at present. Sorry you're forced to—inclined to part with it, I mean—but I've just lost a good deal on Chichester turf, through that blasted Harkaway of mine, and—if it's a good offer you've got, from a right sort of quarter—nothing of the Buff kind—none of these sly Whigs—why, I'd say, neighbour, close with it!"

"As I mentioned the old Cloynes," replied his companion, "I may as well say 'tis from their agent in London. It seems the young man—he must be rather elderly

now, by the bye—has taken to better courses than was supposed, and prospered tolerably abroad, and for all I know, may be in this country at present. The old Grange, as I reminded you, belongs to him, and instead of intending to sell it now, he at all events wishes to add this piece of property adjoining. Natural enough, and if Poplar Farm were drained and otherwise improved

“’Twould be more than worth the money, I grant you. At a pretty cost, though—more than you or I either would like to name! Eh? And if the old clay-pit—‘Old-Squire’s Folly,’ as they call it—turned out a good brickfield *without roads from it*, as your good grandfather, it’s said, intended?”

“That may have been, however, Sir Thomas, before he agreed with Sir Robert, your father, in closing up Chipping Lane. Chelmsstone got up the brickfield that was wanted, and flourished in consequence.”

“Well, well, let bygones rest,” said the baronet, annoyed, but chuckling at some thought. “The Cloynes were a county family—a good family—and if the young slip of a spendthrift stock has sown his wild oats, let him make up for it by fancy brickmaking if he likes. Rather he’d come back and build up the Grange again, and turn out a good neighbour—I’ve no objection to him. Very likely means it—eh?”

“Possibly,” was the thoughtful answer of the Squire. “His previous history may incline him to reserve at first, as he seems to be inclined at present. Still, Sir Thomas, I preferred renewing the subject to you, before I finally agreed. At best, Mr. Cloyne is estranged from the neighbourhood, and his moral character still doubtful. As for politics, if he holds any—which is unlikely—his agent is of our own party, and I only fear for the client, that equivocal employments under despotic power abroad may have done little for him in that respect. Every one of the Cloynes would appear to have been possessed by a pride sometimes fiendish—the scorn and insolence to

inferiors of Venetian nobles. If I recollect rightly, 'twas something of that kind which led to that lane being closed, with the help of vulgar superstition."

"I like 'em none the worse for that, Squire," rejoined Sir Thomas, with a laugh. "In that case, young Cloyne, you know, or old Cloyne—he won't object to my keeping it so. As I've sometimes suspected *you* might do, in private, of course—in private, I mean, Ashburton."

"Is it possible," ejaculated the Squire, suddenly reining round, and staring at the workmen in activity at the entrance, "that you are not *opening* it! I thought the pales were not to go up again?"

"Ha! ha! ha! Neither they are—neither they are, Squire," mirthfully bellowed his co-proprietor. "I should think not—ho! ho! I should think not.—Hallo, though!" and he pulled up his horse, wheeling about to look. "Where are your eyes, you fellows? Turn out these young rascals, there—stop that old woman with the basket, send her back, I say, the way she came!—It's the foundation, they're digging, this time, of a good *brick wall*. You don't object, I hope, Ashburton?" "Oh—certainly—certainly, Sir Thomas—it matters not to me, of course, nor indeed to Poplar Farm in any hands." "And if Cloyne *did* turn to brick-making, besides," rejoined the other, "he'd find it rather late with the wall. Use and wont—and prescription nearly run out. Moreover he buys it so, I hope—if you're the neighbourly man I take you for?" Mr. Ashburton nodded a mild assent; and Sir Thomas was good-humoured as he still shouted, "Softly, softly, James," to his groom, who had got down with a whip to the boys: "let the fright serve that little jackanapes! Pass—that whimpering young gipsy—you may let the old jade pass. Here Goody Grey-cloak, come out I say—but I'd advise ye not to cut through my private grounds again, except by the drives."

Of by-standers there were plenty, rather obscuring the view: Tom Hubbard, the cobbler, and Simon Gray, and

various others. So the baronet rode a little nearer. "Zounds!" he roared on a sudden, signing to his groom for the whip, "who's that skulker—have him out from behind, I tell ye!" A hustle, and a silence, but no answer; and hearing a strange whisper, Sir Thomas leaped his hunter over the rubbish with an oath, in time to perceive the liveried form of Dr. Smith's serving-man lugged out before him. One tremendous oath, and the heavy old baronet was down upon the ground, whip in hand, lashing madly at Solomon, whose collar he had clutched; from Solomon not a cry, nor a word, only he writhed round at the large reddened face, the volleying oaths, and stamping top-boats, seeming as if next moment he would get a forked tongue to dart in somewhere, with silent exquisiteness of relish. But he was torn away too soon.

"Constable," called Sir Thomas, taking breath, refreshed and delighted. "Take this scum in charge. The stocks, constable. For the next three hours. It'll do. For *him*. Next time it'll be his master!" Then Sir Thomas, troubling himself no further, mounted and rode off homeward; as the Squire, it seemed, was gone.

The constable, though an acquaintance, had to take Solomon and lock his feet in accordingly, on the public green. Solomon made no resistance, and sat silently, regardless who looked at him, till after sunset, when the constable most punctually unlocked him, by the church clock. He apologized humbly to Solomon; and Solomon took it in quiet, with a slight nod. He wiped his soiled livery, restored his hat to shape, and put it on again; then, his lips always moving but without sound, he walked off slowly, home to the Grange.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHOWING SOME EXCUSE FOR NUGENT BEFORE, BUT
NONE AFTER.

"VERY well, Ashburton, my dear, have your own way as usual. If you persist in thinking it desirable. Not merely, observe, to become conspicuous as the young man's patron—mixing yourself up with the private affairs of the people—but absolutely—absolutely, recollect, to put it as a favour to us, that Norris should be allowed to replace this person. Which is, in truth, a favour to *them*—a perfect charity ; as the person cannot remain long at any rate, with the Deanes against him—not to speak of Mr. Cloyne, who will be sure to side with any crotchet of Sir Thomas's, I should think. But let it be so. Go, if you will—and arrange it as you please. Only, let it be in the considerate way—the delicate mode I advise."

" Really, I feel it so, Amelia—'tis the very delicacy of the case makes me so careful to understand you clearly, before going. In such nice matters, I defer more than I can express, to *you*. Might not the best course be, after all, a direct assault on the grand cause himself—the *fons et origo mali*—by a frank personal interview to state the case? I confess I grow curious to see this terrible bugbear, who threatens to be so universally alarming! A *rara avis* he must be! I could at once form my own judgment and let him know, if necessary, why he must decamp—be off—yield—vanish—so as to save, by the bye, the remotest appearance of a bargain with our friend Mrs. Smythe—of officiousness—of taking advantage and not knowing how to conceal it without—in short, without equivoca——"

" My dearest Ashburton—my dear Cuthbert! There again—that confusion as to the true way of avoiding improprieties! The truth is, I see, a woman's

feelings can only be appreciated by a—a lady. Suppose, then—I simply take it into my own hands, and—yes—consent to manage *your* plan? Well—if you will wait till to-morrow, when you are away with the young people on their gipsying-party—I will go the Grange, much as I dislike it, *myself*!

It was like the rescuing descent of a *deus ex machina* to the Squire, whose perplexed countenance became grateful with the relief. So he expressed himself; alluding also, with a half-playful pedantry, to the unexpectedness of the Gordian knot being suddenly cut by the very hand which had pointed it out: yet never saying he had not worked all the while for that express end, in that sly side-humour of his. He was in his arm-chair near the fire, his back towards the window where she sat; and with his side-glance but half-observant, he leant back musingly, a half-cut new number of the *Gentleman's Magazine* turned down over one knee, which the other knee comfortably supported. The time, before dinner, of a fine spring afternoon, shortly subsequent to his ride with Sir Thomas. Present to him, only—so far as the apparent scene was concerned, in the old-fashioned withdrawing-room of Hinchbrook Manor—his own fair matron, whose somewhat stately amplitude sufficed for the settee she sat on, seeming to possess and occupy the whole broad window-space. In that casemented, mullioned, many-framed window, obsolete in itself, might be the stained-glass bordering, with coloured armorial devices in it—dusky, quaint, tarnished or ill-mended, the gilt ciphers inclosed here and there by slender lattice-work, glazed with greenish panes,—but Mrs. Ashburton's presence made it more than modern. Antiquated recess though it might have been, it would now have seemed, even without her, conveniently *boudoir*-like; cushion and footstool being there, polished work-table, writing-stand, and desk, with light French requisites and trifles; while all throughout the room, as from that fountain, was diffused a showy thrift of furni-

ture chintzes and of figured floor-cloth, and a wall-up-lighting paper of recent style had covered the loss of many an old picture, by its scattered pastoral scenes, its playful groups of Cupids and Chinese grotesqueries, not too gaudy, or often repeated, with flowery festoons between, trophies over-arching, plenteous cornucopias pouring down from the corners. But Mrs. Ashburton's form and aspect put life into it, connected it, made it sensible, and experienced, and full of the world; her very dress converting the dim stains to richness where they fell on her, and bringing in the earliest spring sunshine prosperously, till it looked summer. She had been looking over a house-book, she was still sealing letters she had written, and yet could talk in the most self-possessed, unabstracted way; nay, added to all and along with all, she could see outside, listen to voices, and notice circumstances there. There it was still gay and brighter, with livelier movement and happier animation: for all the rest of the family were thereabouts, including two or three more. Some of them at times close below, on the old flagged back-terrace above the garden, on which the oriel projected; where the sunlight westered all the better that it was unshaded, all the brighter, now and then, that it was windy, and the warmer for some recent rain; with buds half-burst, and early flush or foam of blossom, and the shelter of house and holly-hedge and neighbouring timber. Mr. Ashburton knew it as well as she, only did not see it.

"Yes," she replied, sealing at the same time another letter, with complacent attention fixed outward too, "everybody ought to understand what a crotchet of old Deane's is—a thing not to be opposed, but given in to. Still, for *my* part, I should of course begin by mentioning to Mrs. Smythe his kindness on her son's behalf—the rest as a matter of gratitude. As to my brother, it is merely a fortunate circumstance that he can make up for the loss in question."

"Ah, true—true—there you touch the point with a

needle!" responded Mr. Ashburton. "Gratitude to Sir Thomas, and the rest follows. Why, the boy may be a bishop, yet!"

"Possibly," was the cold answer, though the eyes smiled toward the window. "Thirty or forty years hence.—About this person, though, this Smith—I happened to mention it with Mr. Singleton to-day, when we were talking, and the young gentleman informs me that his father, the mayor, has no great opinion of the man. He has given trouble at Chelmsstone too, and I infer it would please the Singletons considerably. Which matters quite as much, I think, Cuthbert, to *us*?" The Squire gave but a careless assent. He smiled, drummed on the table with his fingers, took up his magazine to read again, and sighed. The twofold expression of his lady's features became the more obvious; satisfaction towards the outer scene, resigned toleration toward that within; well-pleased watchfulness of the garden-terrace, compassionate concern for the drawing-room fire-place; a growing interest approaching to delight, as regarded the perspective from the background; and mingling with it, as shade with sunshine, or flickering tint with tint upon her shot-silk scarf, an annoyance at the want of sympathy in the front. "Have you no curiosity at all, Cuthbert—no care even for a pretty picture?" she said. "If you have not—shall I at once tell you, then, what you have not yet asked—the cause of my having so long a *tête-à-tête* this morning with our young lieutenant? The truth is, I *must* do so!"

"Psha!" was the answer. "I can form a tolerably accurate conception, my dear, without your giving me the details—pray spare me them. As you approve of course, Amelia, he has my consent so far to try his chances of success, that is, without obtruding the thing for a time."

"Surely, surely, Ashburton," said the lady, with beaming looks, both inward and outward now. "Believe

me, I appreciate this ready consideration for my wish. Not that it may come off, you know, after all. Mr. Singleton is quite aware that he must wait a year or two in any case—allowing, too, for a little wilfulness and so on—he merely hopes to——”

“I perfectly understand,” interrupted the Squire, discomfortably shifting in his chair. “Hinchbrook Manor is not only burthened by old encumbrances, but by a large number of rising young ones—hey, Emmy? Mr. Singleton—I beg his pardon, *Lieutenant*—is an only son of a rich brewer, who grudges him no expense in his wishes. Well, ‘tis a compliment to Hinchbrook, I suppose, that they take this direction. I mean to let you make the best of it. My only *sine quâ non* is—an imitation, if the reality be impossible, of well-bred and refined conduct!”

“Now, my *dearest* Ashburton,” reasoned his wife, with some tenderness of reproach, “for a single trivial forgetfulness on a merry-making occasion—last Christmas Eve, if I recollect?” “Ah,” was the stubborn rejoinder, “exactly—on Christmas Eve.” “Is not that severity in excess! To *me*, even more than to the young gentleman, who has humbly apologized to me. Besides, how unlike your own liberal habit, to lay such stress on the brewery—forgetting the honourable public position—the son’s eagerness to satisfy us by taking a commission, which places him in another grade of society altogether! As to a ‘brewer’—why, is not one of your particular and most elegant friends in town, Mrs. Thrale, the widow of a ‘brewer’?” A most triumphant demonstration of Mrs. Ashburton’s, sheathed in gentle diffidence as to the literary circle she mentioned. “Ha! ha! Mrs. Thrale?” laughed her husband, lured into good-humour, however. “‘Charming little Thrale,’ to quote with reverence! And ‘sweet little Burney’ too, perhaps. My dearest woman, do you think for a moment of the gulf between the two sets of people! Mrs. Thrale not only never had a husband a coarse old hunk,

ner a son a fool, but saw—knew—and was a favoured acquaintance of the great, the illustrious, the *ever-memorable* DR. JOHNSON. For one distant glimpse of whom I myself would have given worlds, when a young man, and once nearly, indeed——”

“ But do, pray, come to the window, here, an instant,” persevered Mrs. Ashburton. “ That you may not retain that idea about ill-breeding! The drill and the contact with military men and others, assisted by your own pointed hint, Ashburton, no doubt—*do* make an improvement.” The Squire acceded to the summons at last, with the half limp in his gait, and stood looking on beside her; not unvisited by a partial gleam of her satisfaction. “ Um—well,” he said, smiling too. “ I supposed he was there, of course. Staying to dinner, doubtless? Yes—I allow—a mighty pretty picture!”

Below the old terrace-steps, a somewhat noisy game went on between the boys and younger girls; among whom (as it was a birthday occasion, and birthdays were frequent at the Manor) Lizzy Smythe's plump figure showed conspicuous; her chubby face beginning to denote the gravity of years and pictorial art, as she rather contemplated, than ventured to join the romps, and kept social company with the great pet-bloodhound, Caesar. Half-way up, against the balustrade, Captain Norris leaning and looking on; in an old forage-cap and loose fatigue-coat, smoking the serpent-like Indian pipe that was obnoxious within doors, and still obnoxious for the governess, Mrs. White; to whom he turned at times, nevertheless, and made observations, whenever she paused on her superintending promenade above, sun-screen in hand, as much for those fumes of his as for the glare of light. Then he responded courteously to any remark of young Lieutenant Singleton, who, fresh from forenoon drill, professed to hover about with that elderly lady, but in truth appeared to seize every opportunity of walking beside the younger ones. Three abreast already, however,—for Miss Jane Smythe was

there with her liveliest looks,—they kept together and sauntered to and fro inseparably : now like a pacing trio of demurest nuns, when Mrs. White was near, now like the chorus of whispering, tittering, confidential nymphs that might have loitered behind Minerva. Nay, at times, by that prim spinster of correct deportment and cultivated mind, there were brief intervals allowed them under the eye of the withdrawing-room above ; during which the juvenile militia-officer could march by their side, shielded by her last reproof for levity, and take confidence from his scarlet and silver, with the jaunty supporting of his sword in the left arm, to bend over the while, making gay speeches, paying great compliments, drawn on to attempt witty sayings, without a laugh or titter against it. And now on this side, now on that, hastening or delaying or stopping, Lieutenant Singleton could scarce be called particular in his attentions ; he was most deferential and submissive, even excessively polite to all.

“ Yet the young gentleman’s ardour,” observed Mrs. Ashburton, within, “ is of the most decided kind. He is ready, if you wish it, Ashburton, to purchase a commission in the regular army and——”

“ And serve abroad a little !” said the Squire. “ Well, *that*, I confess, proves sincerity. I really admit, too, that the young man’s having the capacity to appreciate and form so steady an attachment for—for *your* daughter, Emmy—speaks for him !”

“ But look—can you wonder at it ?” ejaculated the mother, indicating her own sympathy by a gesture and admiring look. “ Premature as it may seem, it shows his taste at all events. He is not alone in the inclination, either !” Her husband followed the look and gesture slowly, seeming by no means so clear on the point. Matilda Ashburton, coquetting and animated, was so far from repressing the civilities of Lieutenant Singleton,—the quick dark glances of Jane Smythe were so from ridiculing him, with the innocent seriousness

she could throw into them,—that when these two elder girls were twined together like sisters, and went dancing archly off, hand in hand, with a flying glance and giggle or two, it was plainly to draw him with them, and leave the younger, the more staid and silent Margaret, altogether deserted under charge of Mrs. White. But after Mr. Singleton had hesitated, looking at a loss, with uncertain glances toward the house, he did not seem to dare follow; and at a careless smile and word of Margaret's, he laughed too, and let them go. The two walked pleasantly enough together, they talked and were merry as they passed; and there was then what was most surprising to the Squire about his younger daughter, a singular air of lady-like assumption and ease and sailing stateliness, that amused him much. For she drew her slender figure to its height, as if triumphant over the others, sweeping on with a gay look she threw after them; while young Singleton kept to her rapid pace, growing even the more awkward. Till on a sudden, as they stood at the farther end of the terrace, he made a most absurd-looking dash upward at an early bud of the month-rose on the south wall, and had to drag it down with his sword at last. *What!* what on earth was he going to do! The Squire stared; he looked to Mrs. Ashburton and back again, seeing her no way surprised.

He was actually having the effrontery, through all that foolish nincompoop-like manner, to offer it to *Margaret!* And actually—yes, beyond conception brazen of her—the more so that it was out of sight from others—actually she was accepting it in a gracious way. No matter that a conscious half-smile seemed at that distance to be breaking round her lip, and that she turned half away—still she appeared to listen with pleasure to what he bent to say. She was almost as tall as he was, at that moment, and really, with the light along the terrace, and the green hollies at hand, and the rose-bud, and the red coat and ungainly back of young

Singleton opposite her light dress and her fair, bright face—her father declared her to look most abominably beautiful for her age, the hussy! “Not a blush at the fellow’s inconstancy and her own precocious unsisterly conduct, either!” exclaimed he, very gravely. “Stay—this must not be allowed, though, my dear. All very well, perhaps, so far,—but now matters are to be serious, it seems, I won’t have Matilda’s feelings trifled with! She may not pretend to any great wit, poor girl—and is, as you say, still very young—but she has a heart, which in course of time may be jealous! even for such an admirer. I *must* stipulate——”

“Is it possible, Ashburton?” was the surprised rejoinder, “*possible*—that you imagined *her* the object? *Matilda?*”

His amazement surpassed hers vastly. “Then you absolutely—absolutely mean—Margaret! *Margaret?* with that voice—her air—her fine turn for everything the most unlike the—the presumption of the thing! The fellow must be crazy! For Heaven’s sake, Amelia, a mere child, too, besides! But the girl has just the kind of spirit to disdain it—see—there—I said so! Ha! Look for yourself, then!” In fact, Margaret had turned straight at something said by young Singleton, looking right into his face with such composure, such irrepressible amusement, her eyes lit by an expression so wholly unsuited to his tender manner, that the gallant attitude was caught midway; while he stared, positively gaped, at some answer; and then she curtsied gravely to the ground, with down-dropt eyelids and folded hands of the extreme modesty, holding the rose still, listening for his words, a picture of arch expectation. In vain he affected a careless ease, twisting his sword-knot nervously and looking round for help; till making a sudden stop again for some momentous purpose, he stumbled over his loose weapon, and might have fallen headlong but for her prompt help. She was laughing, and Singleton himself

was laughing wildly with her, and the Squire laughed too ; everybody else looking round and laughing, except Mrs. Ashburton, who bit her lip.

"Pray, pray, excuse me, Amelia," apologized her husband, laughing still, "but—but—to see her offering her handkerchief for those silk stockings of his, and co—co—consoling him, I mean—'tis too much for me. What did you observe, my dear ? 'Let us be reasonable and not romantic ?' Oh ! Well, I will. Go on."

His wife had recovered equanimity, and could reason calmly. "I can quite anticipate what you might object, I think. She is scarce sixteen, she is rather inclined to be wilful, she has been indulged and brought forward—chiefly by yourself, *mon cher papa*, and Uncle Norris—and Norris, as her godfather and my favourite brother, will of course fulfil our just expectations if she deserves them. I also agree with you that she might have that little head of hers turned, if, proving the beauty she bids fair to be, her *débüt* were to be allowed without some sort of fixed prospect. But a year or two, believe me, *changeront tout cela*, with the slightest knowledge of the world,—of life, in fact. A good establishment and handsome settlement such as old Singleton could make at once for an only child—he is worth a cool *hundred thousand* at the very least, as you know—with a devoted husband who will only value her the more if he has to—to look up to her a little ! Not to speak of the certainty of his getting into Parliament for the borough, if desirable—a house in town—carriage, plate, everything, for they are rather showy people, I own—yet the elegant society at your own command—not a wish of hers but to be consulted ! And, really, Margaret promises to be equal to it, as well as to look it. She might shine at Almacks before long, and soon not be dazzled, either !"

"She might—she might ! Yes, Amelia !" responded Mr. Ashburton, eagerly. For who did not know, although he might fancy himself so rationally impartial,

that his second daughter, with the Ashburton family likeness and that Ashburton voice of hers, was peculiarly dear to him? Both qualities had been costly to the race, and there were old stories of Ashburtons that had suffered for their eloquence or their looks; though in him it had come to be but a musical hobby and a clogged bodily presence—" *claudopedalis, quasi Pædâ, Fortuna,*" as he had himself jestingly called it,—the lame-footed fortune of being more refined than his forefathers, or his contemporaries either. "Miss Meg had even a turn of your own self-possession just now," he added, with a pensiveness in his smile, "though you were older, and more practised, I fancy—having certainly had far greater advantages besides—that time you and I rode together to—somewhere or other—long ago!"

"To Eastwood, you mean," and the matron smiled too, "that very fine day which turned out so ill, as to the weather, at least? I recollect it. Yes—when you——"

"When I was not laughed at, however, Emmy. No. Happily not." There was a kind glance returned to the playful touch of his, which patted her fair, full cheek; not disturbing the collectedness, nor breaking the composure. "Nor were such things required, Amelia, to weigh with you. We rode home without a thought of them, I do believe. And in fact—in fact—you never have had any of them."

"We have been perfectly contented together, Cuthbert," she said, radiating cheerfulness: otherwise he would have looked down a little sadly. "We can be happy here, as we are—quite happy enough. I would not even be ambitious for any of them—except Margaret. As for Matilda, like myself, she would certainly do best in a quiet way, with some one superior to her in mind, in pursuits—but Margaret! No! I have marked it in her—there is a spirit, a brilliancy, as you remark, a pride that would not brook its match, even, without

danger. And as for using the least constraint, why, so far from it—I would leave all to herself. That is my sole wish, dear Ashburton."

"Well, well—I shall be a philosopher in the matter," returned the Squire: looking scarcely like one as he shrugged his shoulders. It seemed to console him more, when a noisy shout came up the terrace-steps, and Margaret gave way to a very juvenile impulse again, in leaving the lieutenant. The great pet hound, his head blinded in Lizzy Smythe's hat, with Captain Norris's sash twined round him, struggled ridiculously to escape, as she joined the merry rout. Next minute, overturning all before him, Cæsar bounded up and fled; and the Squire thought for a moment that he caught a most refreshing glimpse of the early rosebud vanishing also, as a precious pledge fixed in the brass collar. The sound of the dinner-bell covered his interjectional comments, and summoned away the chief figures of both scenes.

Even a stoic, however, could not, he said, as they departed, endure a long after-dinner session beside the young lieutenant, even with Uncle Norris by. "A quiet game at chess in the library, perhaps, or possibly a quartette or two in the music-room, might help to pass the evening. By the way, where is our young friend Nugent? Not there with the rest?" Mrs. Ashburton thought not—perhaps not likely. He had not been so much about, lately. He had appeared rather moody, indeed, and strange, on any recent visit. "It had struck me, too," was the Squire's answer: "I trust nothing has been done or said by any one, or *shown*, my dear,—to offend him? From his present position, probably, I perceive he is sensitive."

"Oh, no—nothing, so far as I know," said the lady of Hinchbrook. "One's manner, you know, may change involuntarily. And I confess, favourite of mine as he used to be, I think the lad idly inclined. But only some extravagant act could induce me, of course, to *say* so."

"He does not *read* here of late, certainly. To-day,

when I chanced to meet him near the avenue, I hinted as much—and Trinity Term will soon be here, with the summer itself. I must undoubtedly have a conversation with him—a serious one—as we go to the Dingle to-morrow with the young folks.”

“You—you really *have*—that is, *of course* you asked him?” said Mrs. Ashburton, hiding some measure of annoyance.

“If the day prove fine—certainly. Nugent might as well go to see that the primroses are properly found and gathered, I should say, as myself—or Mrs. White. I am not too partial, my dear, to the conversation of Mrs. White, however elegant. Still less, now I think of it—to that of Lieutenant Singleton, who, I presume, will also superintend the primroses and the gipsying.”

“Do me one favour—keep him by you, then, as you ride. Mr. Singleton, recollect, as a young man and an officer, at least, might be apt to take umbrage at any boyish freak. In that case I shall trust the rest to Mrs. White, and keep my word about that little Grange business—which after all may be better despatched without the son’s opinion at all on the matter. His sisters, too, cannot well be left uninvited.”

“True. True. Then our conversation, my dear,—mine and Nugent’s—will not be, I assure you, about primroses. But about Trinity Term and the work of summer.”

“Trinity Term and summer,” said the lady, biting her lip as they went in to dinner, “seem particularly slow to come.”

The day did prove fine, for spring. And so the festive birthday excursion, in search of primroses and a spot for comfortable gipsying, was carried out to Copley Dingle, with the woods of Fernacre, as appointed. Mrs. Ashburton, not rural in her tastes, nor inclined to pony-riding at that season, though scarcely in person stouter than became a matron, remained to make her quiet visit to the Grange. While over by Chelmsstone Common,

and past the canal-banks, over the bridge and away to the sheep-downs that let themselves slope to Copley, the livelier procession took their route: when Mrs. White showed herself a vigorous pedestrian, and Captain Norris and the young lieutenant her most gallant coadjutors: the Squire riding soberly after, with Nugent grave enough at his bridle-rein.

Even when they reached the scene of merry-making pleasure, Nugent kept markedly close by Mr. Ashburton, as the tone of their discourse had made natural. Whether they hunted for primroses, or rambled about a ruined abbey-walls, all echoing and ivy-hung; gathered faggots and kindled fires, or prepared their very vernal picnic in the well-known rustic summer-house of the place, moss-lined, decked with pine-cones, snug with uncouth seats, which made it a compromise with the early season. Whether they made commonplace excursions for milk to the neighbouring farm-house, or bold expeditions down the bank for water to boil the kettle, that indispensable and sacred ark of their journey; or were very lively and boisterous in the junior portion, or wished for music and dancing with the senior, and began to find it stupid altogether, making plans for a Midsummer one on a grander scale. There are people—who not?—that seem to themselves to have stood apart at that doubtful, unsettled age with young Nugent Smythe, looking on the rest askance, but not of them; with wild, self-scornful control of themselves; that they might not be thought sullen or gloomy, but merely superior. Very few, however, with his darkly-glowing eyes of passionate impulse, and his southern tinge of complexion, and a forehead at the same time so marked by early thought; with the pride of gentility and poverty about him, and perhaps the flush of shame, at times, to feel so tall and vigorous, so talked-of for brilliant parts, and so consciously classical, mathematical, or read-up in history—yet to be nowhere, nobody, doing nothing, not even gipsying. And nobody noticing it, or professing to care

for it: even the Squire pleased to have him by, as a companion, somewhat an incoherent one.

At an accident, of the most trivial kind, what exaggeration of his wonted alertness, activity, and delight to help! He dashed out of the summer-house from Mr. Ashburton's side like a hound let slip, and before they well knew that aught was happening, he was bounding from bank to bank to the help of Mrs. White amid her screams; knowing better than she, by far, that it was Miss Margaret Ashburton, helped by the militia lieutenant, who had slid her foot on the damp, and would have followed the precipitate descent of Mr. Singleton, down the declivity. Nugent caught her with a single spring; he pulled her up from the gallant grasp, letting Singleton slip and tumble, over the stones, far among the nettles. But it was a very trivial case indeed. There was only a sprained ankle to Margaret; to her cavalier a few scratches and a contused head. The young lady would have to be set on pony-back, instead of one of her younger sisters, and, without a riding-dress save Mrs. White's shawl, be thus taken home, some one leading by the bridle. Yet what a sudden flow of spirits on Nugent's part, what animation, and what undoubted proof that he, of all the party, knew the way best along that troublesome road, with the dusk to come before they reached the highway! So that he must lead the pony, keeping close by Margaret and talking to her; whether Lieutenant Singleton should keep by or not, on the other side.

How well he could lead a pony, and cheer Margaret up! They not only talked, but laughed, and were at last in the highest spirits together. Until the lieutenant dropped silently behind, out of sheer necessity, and taking a social conversational part on things in general, became a dreadful companion to the Squire. And the Squire blessed the sight of his own avenue-gate, fervently hoping never to share with him another primrose-excursion.

When Nugent took his sisters home, Mrs. Ashburton's visit and business had been long despatched. It was then he first heard of it, and of the proposal for dislodging Dr. Smith. "Do *you* approve, Nugent?" asked his mother, when they were left alone. "If so, I must write to Mr. Price to-morrow—explaining things, requesting him to give due notice to our tenant. The half-year, for which Mr. Price arranged, expires—so Sarah tells me—ten days hence. Dr. Smith has been most inoffensive to us—most easy to satisfy—no one could have given less trouble—he seems perfectly respectable, an exceedingly worthy, well-meaning, estimable man, for all I can see! Even his servant has been well-conducted here, at least—I cannot understand it. Sarah, whose opinion, of course, I did not ask, appears disposed for the first time to rebel—and I fear Captain Norris may prove a less suitable occupant. Yet, what am I to do, Nugent? It was very kind of Sir Thomas to make this promise to Mr. Ashburton for *you*—unasked—no conditions—a man of his word, too, always. And it seems Dr. Smith has in some way offended and given a great deal of trouble to Sir Thomas. Nay, it turns out that not very long ago his man had to be put in the village stocks!"

"Do you ask my advice, mother?" replied Nugent, rather bluntly. "And will you take it?" "Could he doubt it—could he ask! Except on *his* account, she could not help feeling an instinctive repugnance to it still. After assuring Mrs. Ashburton, even, that it was Mr. Price's arrangement—and Mr. Price could save all trouble in the matter—and that Mr. Price should be at once instructed by letter."

"Very well, then," was Nugent's cool conclusion, "my advice is—to let *me* write it. Leave it to me, as it's my business. And if it weren't, 'tis time I began, mother, to manage yours. I don't see what Mrs. Ashburton's got to do with it—I don't see why you're to take up Sir Thomas's quarrels on my account—and I

don't see why, if the end wing's to be let, acquaintances are more suitable than strangers ! It's not the fair thing besides, to Dr. Smith. So, if he wants to stay, he shall. That's all. That's what I'll write, if I am to write, and I'll write it *now*." " But then, Mrs. Ashburton—she would expect some explanation ? "

Nugent Smythe gave a perfectly-assuring, careless nod ; and as it seemed there was an entire confidence between him and Mrs. Ashburton, he was left tranquilly to sit down and write the letter. A prompt, a business-like, a dashing correspondent, with what easy flow and what emphatic, decided turns—why had she not deputed such troubles to him before, since he saw so clearly ? But he had given the cheering assurance, in return for the good-night kiss—" Don't think, because I'm to be away a while after Trinity, that I can't manage for you. Cambridge isn't so far, but that a run down could be made, if necessary. Between terms, of course, I can read better *here*. And never you mind promises of curacies, mother—never mind new tenants—never mind Ruck and Co.—for I mean to make it quick work and strike high, *very high indeed !* "

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE PLOT THICKENED.

MR. PRICE, of Notley, sat briskly chafing his hands, chirping, bustling, and talking of business, and showing business papers, one fine spring morning subsequent, in the large old room of the end wing at the Grange. Still in morning undress, with the breakfast things on the table, the stout elderly gentleman sat opposite, half listening, partly noting arithmetical figures or adding rapid calculations. " About that matter, though ? " said he, looking up abruptly. " It's no such trifle. You've called there this morning already, you say—well

—a little sluggish myself, I must confess, for a business man—but you, Mr. Price, you're a pattern of despatch! I like despatch, sir. I'd have despatched it one way or another, myself—off or on altogether—if you hadn't followed your note."

Mr. Price said something about "the early bird" and "the worm"—stating also that he had far more important matters than *that* to discuss. He had observed that the Doctor was at breakfast, however, and spent a few minutes next-door. "Merely for form's sake—merely so—nothing more," he said. "No business worth talking of there, as the thing was settled. If it's an object to you, Doctor, of course you have the place at your option." "It is an object, I tell you, Price—it's the more an object," replied Dr. Smith, hastily, "that it's an object to get me out, it seems, with that infatuated old big-wig, and—aha! with these Ashburtons too, you tell me? Why, rat it, man! how am I to carry out our plans, or you either, if I haven't so much as a pivot for 'em—the very shaft for the beam and scales, in the shape of a house, or even a single room in the place? Eh, tell me that, Mr. Price! We forgot to secure the very foot-room under us, and the plot thickening, sir! Even if I at this moment, now, were proprietor of this very Grange itself, and were to quarrel with these people, these Smythes—almost the last people that haven't quarrelled with me already—hang it, I suppose, now, I couldn't stay in my own house; much less turn 'em out?"

Mr. Price smiled. "I suspect not—certainly not, Doctor," said he. "Mrs. Smythe has a lease, with above three years to run yet. And yours, from me, in her name, expires in a few days. Here is her own letter, however—read it. That's satisfactory enough, I should say, as you seem so inclined! From her son, by the way. I question if the lady herself would have written so briefly—so decidedly. Indeed, she admitted as much to me just now. I could see it—you're more indebted

to the young man, young Smythe, a frank, straightforward young fellow at any rate—than to her.”

As his valued client perused the letter of Nugent, the little lawyer eyed him somewhat curiously : seeing the inflammable visage take a still deeper hue, Mr. Price peered at it, considered it inquisitively, and was evidently doubtful whether to look unconscious or smirk forth his growing belief in a certain rumour, that had circulated even as far as Notley in Kent. “ Well, well, no matter how it’s come to,” said Dr. Smith, reaching the letter back again, “ or *why*. If it’s understood, and I’m secure. Not such a bad sort of chap, that lad, surely ? Writes a good business hand—and it’s bold of him, considering what you tell me about old Deane and this Mrs. Ashburton. Odd, eh ? ”

“ *Foolish*, I should say, if I were advising ’em as clients. And might ruin his own prospects, if it don’t do ’em harm at home.”

“ We might make it up to him some way, in that case,” rejoined Dr. Smith, with a selfish haste to dismiss the subject. “ I dare say you have situations yourself, sometimes, in your office or somewhere—never mind at present—see about it. To business, then ! You’ve secured matters at Chelmsstone—you’ve got t’other old premises from the borough, and that fresh piece of waste ground from Singleton ? They can’t draw back now—no more need to hold in the shade, I think—no necessity to keep secret any longer, Mr. Price ? ”

“ The pear’s scarcely ripe yet, I suspect—scarcely,” said Mr. Price, going into it all with renewed vivacity and relish. “ A good deal to be done before we could meet a sudden dissolution of Parliament, my dear sir—of which, luckily, I see no immediate signs. The moment the war’s over, though, it may come. In some points, Doctor, we’re secure as the British Constitution itself—that’s to say, of course, the little of it that don’t need reform. Might command about a dozen votes, direct—twice as many, to say the least of it, indirectly

and with a little encouragement—*encouragement*, you understand. It's a word quite understood in Notley, where we have had thorough-going Whigs for years—though in Chelmstone they're only beginning to understand it for the simple reason, that hitherto they've been all Tories!"

"By encouragement, I fancy," said the Doctor, very shrewdly, "you mean bribery. I don't mean to bribe, Mr. Price." Mr. Price was horrified at the very idea. What—*bribe*! The Doctor bribe—or he either, for that matter? Certainly not. No proprietor or agent, except a Tory one, was ever so foolish—and even *they*, only when there were no Whigs in the place. The object was, so to purify Chelmstone and the neighbourhood, beyond the mere mingled purity of Notley, as to leave no corruptible element there for the future. Some little trouble there might be—wholly taken, however, by inferior instruments—even Mr. Gimble being, Mr. Price was proud to say, incapable of offering a bribe. Until Chelmstone should be all Whig. The Deanes and Sir Thomas vanquished and departed. "Besides, in addition to what could be commanded, direct and indirect," concluded the lawyer, exultingly, "there is influence, Dr. Smith—liberal and enlightened influence, sir. It would not surprise me, were the Squire himself accessible to it."

Dr. Smith was attentive; he did not deny the interest he felt. "We shall see, we shall see, Mr. Price," he responded. "But again I've to keep you in mind, that I'm not a Whig. I don't promise you to support a party, sir. So far as I understand 'em, yet, we need something more—something a great deal more, about Hinchbridge and Chelmstone, my good friend, it strikes me—than—um—well, Whiggery."

"My dear sir—good gracious! Doctor! What would you have!" Mr. Price exclaimed, lifting up his hands and eyes. "Look at men like Mr. Fox—Mr. Sheridan—Mr. Wilberforce—reformers—patriots—

martyrs, sir, absolute martyrs, often ! Come, you're not a—*a Wilkesite* ? If so, I—I own I couldn't follow you." The little solicitor rose in some emotion, as if to walk away, but came back again. "Never mind, though," added he, cordially, "when the time comes, none can see more clearly than yourself—we've had too much conversation on the subject—the difference is a mere name—you're sure to come round to it. Sir, I tell you I've so much confidence in you myself, that were you in your own person to stand for that borough in a year or two—I declare in that case, Dr. Smith, *I'd vote for you ! I'd support you, sir*, Whig or no Whig—and that without the slightest hesitation !" Sly little Price that he was, perhaps he well understood what it was to be once got into Parliament ; but he was considerably amazed by the coolness with which the Doctor took up his hypothetical idea, as if it were a mere ordinary possibility. "Well, that notion *has* occurred to me lately, Price. But no. No, sir, I'm a little too far down the hill, to look forward even two or three years—and then to begin my training. Neither my pursuits, I'm aware, nor my education, have been the thing—if I *did*. The *House*, I know well enough, isn't just the place to practise in—however good one's lungs, or however important one's thoughts may have looked to one, beforehand !" and here the old gentleman evinced a humorous enough perception of the case. "No, Mr. Price, I'm a plain practical man—though, I hope with some portion of common sense."

"None more so !" responded the little lawyer, most cordially ; "nay, I'll go further, my good friend, and call it shrewdness possessed by few—a clear-sighted judgment only to have been gained by contact with the world. Worth a great deal of learning and theory, I can tell you, even in political matters."

"Why, really," returned his client, by no means overwhelmed with the compliment, "there's not a day, if a man has only eyes in his head, hereabouts as well as in town,

I don't care which—but there's something to be seen which your bigwigs with their eye-glasses and microscopes don't see—or won't! Staring you in the face, sir—hang it, sir, nudging you in the very ribs if you won't hear, and running after you, and crying out! Sir, it ought to be told—it must be told—your high-quality folks must be made to know of it, to get it dinned in 'em, aye, and in a voice of thunder if not more pleasantly! I'm in earnest, sir, about it, if I wasn't so before. And, what's more, although it may require patience for two or three years, I mean to try and get it begun, too, by somebody or other. With your help, your help, I hope, Mr. Price?"

"*Dr. Smith,*" answered the lawyer, stretching forth his hand with solemnity to take the Doctor's, "*count upon me, sir! COUNT UP—ON ME!*"

"I will, Mr. Price," said the Doctor, very seriously, and rose up excited. "Hark ye, then—I've a man in view!"

"A—man—in—view?" repeated his legal counsellor, astonished, fascinated, suspended between curiosity and doubt.

"Aye, a man in view!" and Dr. Smith, in his frequent manner, began to pace the room. "One who might suit—*would* suit, or I'm much mistaken—to put forward some day or other, for Chelmstone, if not for the county! I see in him what might be made much of, sir—the education—the breeding—the natural parts, as they call 'em—the very sort of spirit—the very voice, you'd say, and the look! Only let him see life, Mr. Price—show him the world—discipline him—give him experience and get a hold upon him—*and he'd do*. He'd suit both our notions, perhaps. The moment the pear's ripe, as you remark, I'll give you his name. I'm not yet directly acquainted with him myself—I haven't yet the means of drawing him round to us; but I'm on the way to it, trust me. Now, neither you nor I, Price, would intrude

hastily, I think, nor wish to bind down a future candidate to the letter of our principles? Would we?"

"Not for a moment!" was Mr. Price's decided answer. "The spirit of the Constitution—liberal measures—local welfare and reform—that's all we stipulate for, sir. Ah, indeed, Doctor, and *who*, might I——? No, sir, I've the most perfect confidence in your judgment—not a word of question except as to technical points. The property-qualification, the local connection with the district, with the full attainment of his majority, of course—he's got them? In a strictly legal sense, recollect?"

"Oh—pooh—my dear sir! what d'ye take me for?" said Dr. Smith, stopping still in his rapid walk. "Bring him forward without a single one of 'em? No. I've studied the common newspapers too much for that, I hope. The danger is, its reaching anyone—himself, even—that we've an eye to him. Won't do, just yet—we must sound him, Mr. Price; we must sound him gradually, sir, lest the pear never get ripe."

Mr. Price nodded acquiescence, tapped his little silver-bound tortoise-shell snuff-box, and taking a very small, quiet pinch, with one eye still upon his client, reclined back at ease, when he nursed one leg upon the other, contemplating the Doctor's motions with an air of connoisseur-like interest. "I do believe, Dr. Smith," he remarked, "you have a genius for management, which justifies your evident relish for it. You look a long way forward—but I see, I see; yes, it should have struck me sooner! I know every family of influence in the neighbourhood, both counties. I have the very one in my eye—hum—yes. I could name more than one of that rising family to answer—but not a word—I shan't breathe it, depend upon me. They might do, sir; they *might*. A little eccentric and ambitious—French blood or something, if I recollect rightly—and I see your prudence, Doctor. 'Twould be a regular revolution at Chelmsstone, true; yet in time we might compass it. But, my

dear sir, you should positively live on the spot, the distance here, small as it seems, is inconvenient."

"I like the drive, Mr. Price," said the old gentleman, cheerfully. "I like it. I'm not a dyer, or a clerk, or a bricklayer, though I like to overlook 'em. Health requires daily exercise, as I'm aware, though not a doctor."

Mr. Price laughed. "So you've told me, I grant, more than once. It's only a determined notion of your rustic friends, which, I confess, I've fallen into myself. Really, my good sir, 'tis hard to say what you are, or are not. But," and the solicitor glanced round the apartment, "on the whole, the accommodation here—'tis scarcely up to your position and views, not to mention your—yes, Mr. Smith, your wealth, I *will* say. Come. Might I——"

"As to Hinchbridge," interrupted his hasty client, "I don't want to miss sight of it; it needs more reform than Chelmsstone, even. Why, sir, if thrown out for the borough, we may see our way on to the county. You've no notion of its capabilities—a better school required than the dame's one, which I got up—would suit exactly yonder, see, between Muggops's and old Dockett's! Then the 'Pig' itself, as I've said inside it, before, 'twould make a first-rate inn for the cross-road which 'll be needed, even after the lane's open, when the village, sir, is noted—frequented, enlarged, double, triple, Mr. Price!"

The lawyer stared, echoing some of his words in a frightened, distant, retreating style. Something he added about the "bounds of reason," and "keeping in them." Dr. Smith's matter-of-fact aspect alone calmed him, as, taking a note-book from his pocket, the former opened it at a particular place, then handed it over in a business way. "The chemical constituents of a spring," he explained, coolly enough, "which I found some time ago in the vicinity, over beyond those fields you see from t'other window, past the corner, in a place called Poplar Farm, where there was a brickfield intended once, by the

bye. Both could be carried out, sir; both, with common sense and capital. The spring alone would make the proprietor's fortune. I sent a bottle of it to the first analyst in town, after trying it over and over again myself—equals Bath or Cheltenham, with ingredients found in neither—rather more of some German Spas. Judicious advertising, Mr. Price, with the rural character of the surrounding country, helped by the brickfield, and you might not only enlarge Hinchbridge, but build another Hinchbridge across the brook, connected, of course, by a new iron suspension-bridge in the Italian style. Those bottles on that shelf are some samples."

Mr. Price, for a minute or so, absolutely gaped at him. "Well—but—would Squire Ashburton think of it for a moment? As for old Deane, it would drive him insane—he's shutting up the lane at this moment, Mr. Smith, although—although——"

"Well reminded, by the bye," smartly rejoined the client. "You've applied for that writ, I hope, and got it? Very good. Have it served, sir—to-morrow. I mean it, Mr. Price."

"‘A writ of injunction and recovery,’" read the lawyer, taking out the parchment in question, "‘at the instance and petition of five inhabitants of Hinchbridge, and three of Oakwood, for the right of common way, grazing, and fagotry, through Chipping Lane, &c., &c.’ Well, if you persist, sir? Ah! Then their wall will have to stop forthwith, that's obvious. May carry it to the Lords, before we're done with it, though? In this case, at all events, Mr. Smith, I'd advise—I'd really advise, in the interest of my other client, Mrs. Smythe, that you—you changed your place of abode!"

Dr. Smith had ceased his striding, and begun leisurely to put on his shoes and gaiters for the day, but looked up abruptly.

"Eh—eh, Mr. Price?" asked he, in his testiest way, "quit Hinchbridge—leave the Grange, d'ye say, sir? What's this, pray? I don't quite understand, perhaps?"

The solicitor explained further, giving the proposition its gentlest aspect.

"By gimini, sir, this is odd!" burst out the old gentleman, losing temper fast. "I'm a quiet man—I give no trouble—I've kept a sharp eye over Solomon—not the slightest symptom of dissatisfaction hitherto—I've boiled my own coffee, when necessary, I have dinner sent down every day from Muggops's, by agreement, to which I hold the fellow—my habits are simple, sir, and I've been accustomed to bachelor life—but, by gosh! you tempt me to break through it, Mr. Price! What are you pushing me to, sir, I ask?"

"In Chelmsstone," persisted Mr. Price, soothingly, "or on the outskirts of it, there must certainly be, in fact, I know it, some——"

"Some stuff and nonsense, sir!" emphatically pronounced the Doctor, eyeing him rather suspiciously. "That's always what they say, when I'm to be shuttlecocked and battledored out of this, to Sir Thomas's mercy, forsooth! You're not, after all, in his—no—no, Price, I beg your pardon, but can't you see, man? Look at these bookshelves—Old Sol and I put 'em up ourselves this winter, and arranged the books at no small trouble—valuable books, some of 'em—in fact, I've set about a catalogue—a regular systematic catalogue! Then there's the curiosities and specimens, many of 'em local—this very week I expect some more large cases from town—and upstairs, in the large attic, I've got my laboratory half-fitted! However, I'll advance my terms at once—perhaps they were scarcely the thing, considering—and take a year of it this time, instead of half. Really the place is worth it—look at this room, though it's faded, it's in first-rate old-fashioned style—I like the style so much, Mr. Price, that I don't mind having it repainted by a good London workman that enters into the thing. Was the library, I believe, in times of old"

"But the view, here—that's the point, look out—*any* of the windows," with which he drew Mr. Price to and

fro with him ludicrously. "Muggops's was nothing to them! The best of it is, being highish and at the same time open, you overlook all every way, except the bank yonder. But upstairs, Mr. Price, I've got a bit of mirror fixed in the bed-room window-corner, with a good prospect-glass besides, and I tell you—believe it or not—why, if an old woman pops out in a back-garden to wash potatoes, or for parsley, by cock, sir! you see what she's about. The constable can't let his forge go down, but one may know it—old Dockett can't talk over his pales—Hubbard the cobbler can't sneak behind to the "Blue Pig"—I like to see 'em, like to notice the very cabbages how they get up—hang it, sir, I like it somehow. It's my fancy, perhaps, but I like it. I'm comfortable, sir—quite comfortable—not the least dissatisfied, I assure you, and don't need to change. Not at present."

The lawyer still gazed at him scrutinizingly. "Some day, possibly, Doctor?" asked he, with a knowing twinkle. "Some fine morning to church—he! he! he!"

"Pooh, pooh! Mr. Price," said Dr. Smith, sitting down again and giving the fire a vigorous poke, "it's ridiculous. I'll not be driven into it—out or in, d'ye hear. Ha! a good joke, too. D'ye know, Price, if I ever were to have a fine family mansion in the grand style, newly repaired, enlarged, with a coat-of-arms over the gate to astonish old Deane—a pump and water-bottle, eh, Price—it would be this very Grange!"

"My good sir—my dear sir," put in Mr. Price again, "you'll destroy all by haste—by irritating him too soon to extremities. Consider, if you really wanted a foot of ground in the neighbourhood, neither Ashburton nor the old Cloynes of the Grange, whose agent manages here, would sell that foot at the risk of a breach with the baronet—no matter how much in need of the money."

His client faced short round upon him, laughing in his curious internal style. "Why," he said, "all that's wanted yet, is Poplar Farm to make a property for the

place. And that, let me tell you, Mr. Price—breach or not, or mutiny in the camp, or whatever you like, or want of money—the Grange agent has just bought from Squire Ashburton. The Grange agent closed the business, substantially, a week ago—though the last letter's still wanted, no doubt. It should have come by this post at furthest." Here Dr. Smith pulled his bell-rope with emphasis. "Unless, of course—unless it's being detained a little, *at the Chelmsstone post-office*. Which Solomon, who has gone there, will be able to tell, I daresay.—But it seems, Mr. Price, you're surprised I haven't hitherto done my Town-business through *you*, as I've no objection to do henceforth. In fact, you don't as yet seem to know precisely who I *am*. The Grange agent is my own—I'm the proprietor of the Grange—rabbit it, sir, the place is *mine*."

Helplessly, for a moment or two, from his seat, the solicitor stared at his client. "Who you are?" he mechanically repeated. "No! not young Cloyne—the Mr. Cloyne, I mean, that went off—ah! I never once dreamt of it! How years pass! If I had for a moment suspected you were actually returned from—such a change—a—a—from abroad or—wherever you——"

"Well, well," was the hurried rejoinder, with a perfect renewal of good-temper, "whoever I am, you'll of course see the old title-deeds, and have this new one in your own hands to inform you. That is, if you adhere to me, Price, and take my entire business yourself?" Mr. Price smiled his most indubitable smile. "I'm myself, at any rate, in my sound senses, sir—as you can soon satisfy your own eyes. A breach, did you say—a breach between the Deanes and the Ashburtons, and the Singletons, with the Cloynes to boot, which'll split 'em up into confusion? Wait a bit—but hush—*hush*, though! Here's Sol." The door opened noiselessly. Edging half in from behind it, with a cautious air, his shoes off as if the roads had been miry, Solomon looked in, and

less worth observation for all its gilding, than the well-nigh-intercepted clock. As to aught else, who minded it that morning, or all that sunny, airy, flickering forenoon, full of holiday, or truantry, if not of work that could be cheered by it? The very doctor, Dr. Smith, returned early from Chelmstone business that day: and with all his windows open, could find an occasional pleasure in coming there, looking out, noticing the active garden-work of Lizzy without concealment as to his own, or any great shyness of her recognition: he was merely looking over papers, sorting them; having his portmanteau packed at the same time, for one of his journeys somewhere, by the help of Solomon in the room. Solomon, when that was finished, was let go for the day, and chose to come and weed for Lizzy: he was not going with the Doctor, and might at times weed for her any day during the Doctor's absence, or dig and rake for her if needful. Not that he spoke much more to her than usual; it was not even he, but Sarah that morning, who had mentioned the great event of a new stage-coach from Chichester to London, a twice-a-day stage-coach, the "Highflyer," which that evening for the first time was to pass by Hinchbridge; a thing brought about in no small measure through the Doctor's exertions, to supply the shortcomings of that "Mercury," the mere night coach which had first brought him; for it still ran only once each way, and still changed at the "Deane Arms." The new "Highflyer" was to change, for the present, at the "Red Lion" in Chelmstone; and it was not to come through the village as yet, but enter the old road at the turnpike beyond. Sarah had made bold to state all this casually, for want of other great news, no doubt, when she brought in the kettle at breakfast; with no other drift but to glorify the Doctor, it seemed, in the eyes of the family. Nor, as it was common talk, did she need to mention any particular authority. It was Lizzy, in the garden, who concluded that this might be Solomon, and forthwith asked him if it was the new coach that Dr. Smith was to travel by;

but Solomon, "if there *was* a new coach," which he seemed surprised to hear, "could not say." But it was most likely, Lizzy said, since Dr. Smith had taken trouble to get it set up? And Solomon was apparently surprised to hear that the Doctor had done so. "He never goes anywhere else, I'm sure, but to London." Lizzy persisted. Whereupon Solomon was apparently pleased to be informed. "And if he's going to London, he *must* be going by the new coach, for the 'Mercury' only goes in the morning." Solomon appeared capable of putting these thoughts together, when so stated; but he took it solely from Lizzy. Nay, when Lizzy predicted to him that he would have to carry the portmanteau, and go to catch the coach between there and Chelmstone, he might have taken her for a prophetess for all he showed; but then he might quite as truly have been regarding her as a youthful victim of the Sphynx, seeing that he merely weeded on, not as if it mattered in any case, for a few weeds less or more. It was the most trifling incident that day, perhaps, even in the whole of Hinchbridge.

Far greater was the mere fact that there was a dinner-party that afternoon at the Squire's: a dinner party being, however, not so common there as at Sir Thomas Deane's of the Hall, or even at Major Singleton's in Chelmstone, where a dinner, when it came, was gorgeous. This one, at Hinchbrook Manor, was not so much likely to be gorgeous, as to be select: since the presence of Sir Thomas and Lady Deane themselves, of Mayor and Mrs. Singleton also, including the young lieutenant, was to adorn it. All was known, and for a very good reason, throughout Hinchbridge and at the Grange; because not only were the Curate, with Mrs. Deputy Webb, and one or two young friends, engaged to join the party in the withdrawing-room, to tea and a quiet rubber or two, with the usual lighter gaieties—but in one marked instance the latter invitation had been unaccountably declined, or all but that. Mr. Nugent Smythe, grown indispensable to any musical occasion of Mr. Ashburton's, had been ex-

pressly asked by special billet in Italian lady's handwriting, along with Miss Jane Smythe; and he had answered it, accepting: but suddenly had come another note, in the same writing, Mrs. Ashburton's, to which he had disdained reply; nor was he going *now*, nor seemed to care about the matter, although by that time it was common gossip, how the Squire himself had been made indignant at Master Nugent on account of ingratitude to Sir Thomas, and the Squire's lady had forbidden him the house till he explained. *How* it had come to the Squire's knowledge already, as the half-year's bargain for Dr. Smith was scarce expired—Nugent himself could not have told. He did not ask, however: he did not, in fact, mention at home why he could not go, or give the least guess at Mrs. Ashburton's second note. And Jane Smythe, in high anticipation, was still going; for she could walk that fine weather, by herself; and the Curate and Miss Webb, who were both showing Jane attention, would be sure to see her back at night. To Mrs. Deputy Webb's eyes, in truth, Jane was a fine, quiet, sensible young girl, and very respectful to dignities, and exceedingly docile, with a sweet mild temper, most becomingly behaved at church, if not of the least experience or knowledge in housekeeping, nor ever likely to have; and by that opinion Jane had appeared so to profit, that it might have been fancied she became more and more suitable to the character every day.

Nugent was not going to the dinner-party, nor, to judge from his actions, the least sorry at not going; it was in reality a most excellent forenoon for fishing.

He fished on diligently enough, after he was out of sight from the village; till he reached the oozy mouth of Hinchinbrook, where it entered the larger Hinch, that claimed the title of a river, though as often called by the country-folks a "water." Hours of his sport had passed, when at length he came under the steep bank below the house itself, where the very shrubbery mingled with the natural brushwood, and privet-hedged walks came out

under the ivied trees, to skirt down toward the statelier survivors of fine old timber from the park. There he angled onward still, screened by the bank from observation on that side. And it must be said that he fished there most carefully, and with great steadfastness was engrossed by the brook, that wound gently from behind the Manor House.

He could not have failed to be aware why there were sounds above, at that hour, of liveliness and bustle; gaiety in the gardens, voices about the shrubbery, the very odours of important kitchen-business to be detected in the air: but he did not care for that, nor was he disturbed by it. The rattle of wheels came up the avenue, and might have been known from the heavier, the deliberate roll that followed in due time; the one-horsed noddy bearing the Singletons, a little late, from the great coach and pair of Sir Thomas with Lady Deane, coming a good deal later: after that, a dash and sound of door and bells, and a comparative silence, deferential and solemn. Though amends were made for it by dispersing undertones, that wherever they could scatter, broke out again. And whether the youth cared or not, it became no small matter to be kept from sight himself; when positively there drew nearer his place, to be apart for some anteprandial converse which neither drawing-room nor garden must witness, the heavy tread and halting gait, the muffled bass and the mild tenor, of Sir Thomas and the Squire in hurried interview. If Nugent shrank closer beneath, it was not to be an eaves-dropper, but to keep his own counsel; and whenever the baronet reached the edge above, he disdained to be taken further round, but stopped under the trees and was the more stimulated by the sound of the water, to break forth almost in a shout. "Yes—yes, sir," he continued his discourse, "not a doubt of it—you've gone and made over your piece of property to this very man—this grocer, butcher, or apothecary—this vulgar, meddling old scoundrel, to do as he likes with it

the very last fellow in the world, I tell you, sir, you should have sold it to!"

"Really, Sir Thomas, you astonish me!" answered Mr. Ashburton, with eagerness. "There must be some extraordinary mistake, I assure you. True, I have not yet received any direct document, with the signature of Mr. Cloyne himself—yet it was to his legal agent, acting for him, as I understood—the proprietor of the Grange—that I formally concluded the transaction. The mistake is to me incom——"

"No mistake at all," was the rude interruption. "No mistake, by George—I saw it with my own eyes—Smith, something Smith, is the name. Addressed, no doubt to the Grange here, but all a d—d hoax—you're hoaxed like a gudgeon, sir—I read the whole! A—a—at least I mean I saw a copy of it in the Rector's hands, taken by—by—well no matter, that's not to the point."

"I scarcely understand you, Sir Thomas," said the Squire, in accents of slow surprise. "Do you mean—that—this letter from the agent, containing mine, was—was absolutely opened on its way to the owner? Opened? Not by the post-office, surely!"

"Well—a—a—well," was the confused answer, "the Parson suspected something worse, I believe, and—so Singleton—I thought you might know already about that—'twas rash, perhaps. But damme, Ashburton, d'ye know what this impudent blackguard has had the audacity to do—got a notice of injunction and recovery at law served on my bailiff and attorney—on *myself*, sir—to stop proceedings in Chipping Lane, till cause be shown! His name's at it—he's the instigator, of course—you'll laugh, but it's true! It's too preposterous to credit, by —, but *it's true!*" The old Baronet here absolutely bellowed, stamping on the bank, so that a fragment or two came crumbling down over Nugent.

"Is it possible?" responded his co-proprietor, gravely. "This seems a most gratuitous step, and I——"

"Gratuitous, sir! What d'ye mean? It's a studied insult," pursued Sir Thomas, hoarse with rage. "And by Heaven I'll make the thief repent it—I'll—I'll—we'll have to repel the thing jointly, though—then indict him for conspiracy. But first, of course, you've got to catch him in this business of yours."

"It may be difficult to establish the prescription of right," Mr. Ashburton began, "but I should say on the whole——"

"Psha, none of your niceties, Ashburton," blurted out the other, neither of them even noticing the second summons of the dinner-gong from the House. "But that's not the present point—you must cancel this bargain with the agent at once—the sooner the better too."

"I shall see immediately," returned his host with readiness, "and if honourably as well as legally possible, why—though I cannot say there was any undue management or direct deception, merely a——"

"Is it the money you're tempted by?" asked the guest, in his roughest way. "'Tis a fancy price to pay for that farm, I admit, and for my part I'd think myself out of my senses to offer it—but the more reason to see a purpose in the villain, and by Jove, Squire, as it's such an object to ye, we'll *subscribe* it, sir—the whole county-meeting will subscribe to keep us rid of the nuisance!"

"Sir Thomas Deane!" exclaimed his neighbour, with an agitated voice, "you—you forget yourself—and me, sir! This is a strange tone, and I am not accustomed to it—I will not be treated with indignity—I will manage my own private affairs according to my judgment."

The passion of his guest rose beyond check, however; he uttered a tremendous oath, puffing out a breath like an enraged elephant's. "I'll not stand it, Squire Ashburton!" he holloed out. "I'll not endure it, I tell ye. It's a public concern to root out this vagabond, sir—it's a common interest—you've no right, damme—you shan't, I say!"

"Really, Sir Thomas," replied Mr. Ashburton, firmly raising his voice, though fluttered, "I must remind you that this trespasses on the bounds of patience. I have already explained, and I am willing to concede much to your preju— your wishes—although far from convinced that they are well-founded against the individual in question. I think very equivocal means have been employed—dangerous means, sir—and I will have no part in them—nor shall I retract any fair engagement made by my lawyer, but I will myself see this Dr. Smith, and if I find good ground ——"

"Where's my carriage?" roared the furious baronet, running from him. "Where's my footman?—Jones, here, here, fellows! Have the horses put to again—let Lady Deane know we're going home, sirrah!—D'ye hear me, blockhead?—home—home, I say—back to the Hall at once!—I'll not sit at your table, sir—I'll not enter your door from this day—I don't know you, sir—my family don't know ye!—What, no exposure, d'ye say? By Heaven, I'll expose ye—I'll make it public! Ho! hallo there, Rector—Mayor, I say—d'ye want to know why I go off—why I'm making an exposure? Here ——" And madly heedless of his host's expostulations, his endeavours to soothe or reason, Sir Thomas stormed away upon the front lawn; mingling calls for Lady Deane with denunciations of the blackguard interloper and his patron, as he swore to style the Squire thenceforth. There followed a disorder and murmur of voices, until the carriage-wheels were audible again; and ere long, amidst an inauspicious pause, they were heard to rumble down the avenue like distant thunder.

With young Smythe, first there had been caution, then amusement, to keep him fast to the spot; closed by no small interest as the scene reached its climax. The feeling broke forth when it was over, in a gleeful renewal of more than morning spirits, half-puzzled to know why; or to know any good reason for resuming his occupation with double zest. Unless because, among the stunted

alders in the open park, brightly did the stream spread out and ripple towards him in pebbly shallows; the turf verdant on either side; the stepping-stones from behind the Manor-house garden all visible, where they crossed from offices and servants' cottages, into sight of the back windows, glistening to the afternoon. Perhaps he relished, at his age, the mere thought of mischief; smiling to himself and thinking, but ever actively fishing on, with scarce a glance to those same windows. What matter that the young Ashburtons were about the garden, being no formal diners; and saw him, of course, and, with fishing-rods, too, conferred their company upon him in high delight? Or that the dinner was going on, without Mrs. White and all her pupils, except Miss Ashburton, just old enough to "come out" there the first time; so that, as the gardener's boy wheeled out a load of weeds, the youngest girls could escape a little, to have a sight of sunnier grass, and of fishing, and of cottage children dabbling by the brook-side? Until a flight and chase were made toward the stepping-stones, where Nugent could capture the fugitive, and give her up, struggling, to the shrieking nursery-maid's arms, with the distant thanks of Mrs. White with her parasol at the garden-door. But what a sudden bevy of gay young onlookers near him, dressed for tea-time or arrived early to it, whiling away the hour until the ladies came up-stairs!—including his sister Jane, mutely amazed that this could be his "previous engagement," and the two elegant young cousins of the Ashburtons, from town, to whom he had not been introduced, so that they most properly strutted on with Jane; all in their gloves, their sashes, their dancing-slippers and their untied hats, sunning out the tiresome hour. Wondering more mutely still, looking at him, surveying him till she laughed—Miss Margaret Ashburton, paused behind the back of Nugent.

This engrossment in his sport, after that first start at the shadow in the water, and that hurried half-turned

nod—was, under the circumstances, a rather cavalier-like behaviour. “He certainly was not dressed for company, and could not intend presenting himself after all?” “Oh dear, no! Certainly not. After what had happened. As to having any idea of being noticed by anybody this afternoon in particular, when everybody might be supposed so engaged ——”

“But really, you know, Nugent,” and the girl might well smile, “there was no reason but your own conduct, about something or other, to that—that man—that abominable Sir Thomas Deane, who has just behaved so shockingly, oh, so very disgracefully to papa, you can’t think!” At which, if Nugent did not laugh outright, it was extraordinary indeed; but he affected a careless air, stretching over the more intently to his rod, and watching it as if there had been a sudden bite at the fly—moving up a step, in fact, with half-abstracted answers or looks. “The truth was, at any rate, it turned out first-rate weather, and—and so—so—how shy they are, though! Another miss.”

“How annoying!” she says, entering into the spirit of the thing herself, as usual with Margaret Ashburton; even moving after him cautiously, sinking her voice to an under-tone, keeping her afternoon shadow, as she thinks, back off the water upon the sunlit grass. “Yet not to have come to explain, at least? There, there—this time, Nugent! Yes! Well done—what a beauty!” Yet, as the youth jerks out his captive on the sward, all moist and speckled, fluttering and gasping, she shivers, turns away, and pities it as if he were cruel.

“*Explain?*” repeats the angler, loftily casting a side-glance upon her, while with a relentless air he slips the trout into his basket, and resumes again. “Ha, never! No, Margaret, the time for explanation has gone past. *Past*, I say!”

“Well, to be sure, I dare say papa would be very easily satisfied now,” she answers, “as it has happened. And this evening he would have wanted you so, that

even if you came, don't you think—but really, I scarce wonder at you, with such sport! Half the company to-day are nothing but prosy old dowagers, coming up-stairs to bore each other till the gentlemen follow—very late, too, most likely.”

“Besides,” rejoins Nugent, with a bitter gravity, “I haven’t dined. And it’s too late *now*. No! I’m going to finish. ‘Good-bye!’” The heroic manner of these words, however, is too much sheathed in irony to have a grand effect; and he still moves rather slowly upward, as pleasantly neighboured as ever, till the junior anglers on either hand shall lose interest for the other gay spectators, or the oriel window of the drawing-room show signs of tea-time. Nay, backward though Margaret’s shadow falls, she even steps behind him on tip-toe, to raise that fishing-basket lid in the easy way of long acquaintance, and peep playfully in; while the smooth-flowing pool before him, if it have no other use, has at least a reflection it can force on him, over his averted shoulder, near his own moody features. Gaily expectant, archly inquisitive, and at the trifling disclosure more provoked than by his sharpest innuendo, her bright image looks up sparkling to him, and shows its sudden wonder, and comes forward disdainful—with chestnut hair turned off and up in fashion, for the first time powder-sprinkled and gold-dusted; for the first time lending a rosier softness to the round young cheek, or so set off by lace-trimmed amber-tinted silk, that shines splendid to the sun.

“I declare,” almost angrily, said Margaret, “you have caught almost nothing! One scarcely sees them. After that rain—with *your* skill, too!”

He turned sullenly; to see, perhaps, how fine she was, under the shawl which that May-breeze fluttered, with the untied gipsy-hat so impromptu-like—for all that, stepping forward on a high-heeled little satin shoe, with a bloomy rosette on the arched instep—holding up,

too, by one white-gloved hand, a little train at her skirt. As if she were greatly changed, giving him yet a right to survey and ask her, he said, "Oh! I think, Miss Margaret, you seem to be making your *début* too, to-night! Well, skilful, you say? People called me so, that's all." He wound in his line, and began to take out the joints of the rod. "I suppose I'd better give up."

"I tell you what, Nugent," said the Squire's daughter, taking a very decided tone, and fixing a straight, bright, glance upon him,—“people say something else of you, then. 'Tis true, I begin to suspect. Even when you amuse yourself, you show they are right!”

He coloured up, ceased his occupation, and rather vehemently asked—not raising his eyes to hers, though—“Who said so?—what right has any one to—to—was it that—*that* Singleton?” Throwing an angry notice towards the house, he was then able to face her in a defiant manner.

“Oh, you need not get fierce to any one in particular, Mr. Nugent,” returned Margaret, drawing herself up with at least equal spirit. “The opinion is pretty general, I fancy, that you are an idle young man. Lieutenant Singleton may share it for all I know. I can only speak for myself. I see it.”

“I suppose he is here at present?” retorted Nugent, with a wild attempt at the bitterest sneer.

“Lieutenant Singleton, you mean, amongst the party at dinner,” was the scrupulously lady-like reply. “Really, sir, the supposition does honour to your acuteness. I do presume so. The gentlemen have, at all events, not yet rejoined the ladies; and I imagine that when they do, Lieutenant Singleton will prove to be of the number who have not left us, from whatever disregard of good breeding, or outrage on propriety. Perhaps I might be able to serve you, sir, as we return, by directing a message to be conveyed to that gentleman?” Her air and attitude, in pausing before departure, were the haughtiest

perfection of mimic stateliness, only failing by the dimpled chin, the youthfully-rounded cheek, and the gay side-light in the eye.

These latter, it might be, which as Nugent looked quickly round at the scattered group of her companions with the boys, so changed his mood that he flung down his rod and sprang to the bank beside her. "Margaret!" he said, in a voice suddenly low and tremulous, making her gaze at him seriously: "If I *am* idle—if I'm what you seem to think—I—I might be different. I would prove it to every one, all the world, if you—*you*, Margaret—"

"I don't want you to know how—'tis nothing to me—you need not trouble yourself to explain," said Margaret, coldly turning again; "not in the least! What is worse than idle, Mr. Nugent Smythe, you are *odd*. You have grown more so every day of late, till—till, really, excuse me, sir, 'tis disagreeable to meet you."

"Then this is the last time you shall be troubled in that way, Miss Ashburton, Miss Margaret Ashburton!" returned the young gentleman, sublimely distinct and deliberate; though his face whitened and his frame shook with the suppressed passion. "I am going—and now, *now*—for ever!"

"So you hinted some time ago, more than once too," she rejoined. "I know it. You are to go to Cambridge, and then take orders—a mighty matter!" So went on the girl, in scornful tones, her back absolutely turned towards him; while conscious mischief yet played unseen by him about her face, and she seemed as sportively absorbed as *he* had been before, in practising a dance-step on the grass. "It used to be India, and glory, and battles, or that sort of thing—and indeed I wondered, with such ideas, such brilliant parts as people fancied in you—you could bring yourself so easily down. A country curate!—a prosy vicar, forsooth! with the hope of being a fat old bishop?"

"Then, madam," broke out Nugent in his loftiest strain, "your surprise will become indifference when

you hear that both prospects are lost, if I would now accept either. Yet I beg to inform you, Miss Ashburton, that I scorn the aid of any one—above all, from the remotest connection of Miss Ashburton's family—and if necessary will enlist as a common soldier, or go as the lowest seaman to stake my fortunes upon the——”

Interrupting him with an eagerness that forgot its part, Margaret Ashburton looked round—“But surely Sir Thomas, though he has quarrelled in this shameful way with papa, will not be so spiteful !” she exclaimed. “And, at any rate, Nugent——”

Nugent waved his hand rather effectively, putting down argument, disdaining it. “No—I shall not be accused of again breaking *my* word. Nothing shall change me—nothing. Before another—another week, I mean, I—*I leave Hinchbridge!*” That unfortunate mistake in rhetoric, the anti-climax—that awkward step, from the heroic to the common-place, or lower still—must have been fallen into by him ; for his listener's seriousness partook rapidly of the arch, scrutinizing glance again. Once more the half-averted attitude ; no answer to the speech at all.

“Should I ever return,” continued he superbly, “it will not be, I would have you to know, madam, in any such capacity as you have supposed. It will be as one, of whom all shall be proud, or—or never, *never!* Farewell, Miss Mar——Miss Ashburton !”

Surely he had produced an impression on her feelings at last ; not that she turned round, but it might have been thought she strove with mingled emotions, as in an altered voice she said, “Good-bye—well, good-bye, Mr.—Nugent”—even slightly putting out a hand, as if to receive the parting pressure he offered.

“Good—good-bye,” stammered the young man, not taking it, but standing ; for he was ashy-cold himself, beginning to quiver in every limb.

“*Then,*” she added, and her voice shook too, as she could watch each movement of his vivid shadow beside hers on the golden grass, “in that case I—I—shall

never see you more ! Oh—never—none of us ! We are doomed to—to lose you on these terms ; you will not return at all—an eternal sep—sep—separa——”

Hastily he gazed round, with the thought flashing on him between hope and horror—her bosom heaving, indeed, and her face covered with her hand, and her eyes glittering through moistness as she turned them to him with an abrupt *naïveté*, to sob the sentence out—“ration, Mr. Smythe !” Heavens ! it was but a sharp, bright sally, of that repartee which even outmatched his most brilliant parts—it was laughter : she was laughing irrepressibly, and laughed far more in his face than she had laughed at Singleton. But what could be expected at sixteen ?

“Margaret—*Margaret Ashburton* ! This is driving me to desperation !” Such was his first passionate utterance, recovering from the shock. “Only say—say—Maggie, as I used to be able to say *once*, when we first knew each other—Oh, say if you wouldn’t care for me at all when I came back, Maggie Ashburton ?”

“Really, Nugent,” she said, ceasing to laugh, however, “I have no notion yet. You always allow one such short trials !”

“Are you going to—do you mean to marry that Singleton ?” persisted he, violently.

“What a question ! How indelicate, sir,” was the quiet reply, with a pretence of simpering and turning aside. “Dear me, he has not even asked it *himself*.”

“Answer me—answer me !” Nugent loudly repeated, stamping his foot, while his dark eyes flashed, and in a paroxysm of indignation he clenched his hands and set his teeth, glaring at her. Fury, that day, must have been infectious.

With a lustrous calmness of surprise, she looked him steadily in the face. “Well, then,” she said, “I would—I will—ten times rather than—than *care for* a madman ! Go where you please, Mr. Nugent Smythe—come back as you may, or when.” Then composedly

turning, she moved deliberately away to meet the others, towards the garden. During that movement thither, she was perhaps struck, nevertheless, by his mute fixity of dismay, with the whole unlooked-for extravagance of the thing ; for, some little way off she glanced at him again, one moment, in a livelier style. "Still," she called back, gaily, "*au revoir*, I suppose—as usual?" With the words, Margaret Ashburton tripped lightly after her companions, to the garden-door and through it.

As if stunned for a time, Nugent Smythe stood on the same spot. He did not heed the noisy vicinity of the boys, nor aught else ; remaining motionless, or silently thinking, till with a start he recollected himself. Something or other, with a determined exclamation, came back to his memory. Then he looked at his watch, tore off his fishing-basket, dashed it down, stamped upon it till it was crushed, and would have thrown it with his rod into the running stream ; but he recollected again something, and kept them. He stood still once more, thought more briefly, took up with great presence of mind his fallen cap, putting it on with a firm composure and resolution. That done, all pantomime and dumb-show to any other who might see, he walked very temperately across the stepping-stones, skirted the bushes in a most considerate manner, and, once beyond general notice, began with vast strides and agile springs to mount an opposite slope ; till upon the farther side he ran at speed. Here he was near the high-road, with the houses of Hinchbridge and some of Chelmstone in view, all the fields, woods, and downs in view ; hard at hand a turnpike-bar, from which the road wound and descended towards them, into the hollow by the village ; the Grange being hid by the parsonage glebe and trees. At that point he stopped on the inner side of the hedge, and became deliberate to a marvel ; seeing that he stood to examine carefully what were the contents of all his pockets, to count those of his purse, which included a single new golden guinea folded in

paper—to take out his watch once more, rather to see that it was there than to note the exact time, though he noted it too; for it had been his father's, the Rector's, and was a gold one, with gold seals and key. Then he put his rod and crushed basket under some stones, among the weeds below the hedge: finally, buttoning his coat, drawing himself erect, taking a survey of himself as if to be sure of his standard height, in case of the recruiting-sergeants, he swung himself over with a vault into the highway, regardless of an adjoining gate, and made direct through the last blaze of sunset, for the turnpike at the cross-road. The pikeman stood there, by his own door, leaning over the side-bar with the gate ready to his hand, smoking calmly, but at the same time looking with attention down the road toward Hinchbridge and Chelmsstone. "Fine evenin', Mister Noogent!" he said, starting a little at the surreptitious mode of access, though with a friendly deference in the motion to his old hat; and Nugent nodded. "Very fine for sport," added the pikeman, looking to the hasty manner. "Anywise, for the spring w'eatan' barley?" "Is the new coach past, yet?" asked the youth; "from Chichester?" "That she beant—though she's due," the man said. "Ought t'a been up to time, first trip, I'd say. But sure enough, so-be she comes at all, 'ee'll have prime 'ansel view o' her!" "I want a place myself, Bob," said Nugent, with an easy air: "outside, if there's room. First, though, I want a scrap of paper, a pen and a dip of your ink-bottle, with one of your little chaps to take down a note, home. This evening, mind—and here's a sixpence for him. Left in a hurry, rather—took the cross-cut—wasn't sure about this new 'Highflyer.' It's business, Bob—pressing business. Want 'em to know when I'll be back, of course." "In course," responded the pikeman, returning his pipe to his lips, and ceasing to stare. "Make ye all right, sir—no fear. Tan't every evenin' you goes to town, Master Smythe."

The horn of the new stage-coach was heard at last, coming round by the low road. Before the coach itself mounted the rising-ground, Nugent Smythe had hurried out, with the note written on a leaf from the toll-book, in the ink which served the pikeman's wife to keep that record ; a hasty note for Mrs. Smythe, Hinchbridge Grange. The Highflyer-and-four came swinging up the hill, rumbling, rattling, freshed-horsed at the "Red Lion" in Chelmstone ; and but for the hill and the bar it might have scarcely vouchsafed to stop, with so little room as it had, for so unimportant-looking a passenger, without luggage. All full inside. On the top only one doubtful vacancy, between a fat grazier and a brisk bagman, whose bag would fain have concealed it. And the bagman, already cheated of the box-seat by a traveller more alert than he, if not so brisk, shifted in very ill-naturedly ; leaving but the projected verge to Nugent. "All right !" in his clear young voice, with a cheery parting nod to the pikeman's cordial gesture, as at a trampling bound of impatience, scarce giving him time to clear the wheel, he was whirled off in the act of settling himself, and rattled and rolled upon his way to the world. Meantime out of one window-corner below, a single head in a snug travelling-cap had been once or twice cautiously protruded, and seemed curiously to mark, between surprise and puzzlement, the youth's accession to the load above. That fluttering coat-skirt, the sometimes pendent leg, well-turned and springy, with the signs of a day's sport upon the shoe-buckles that Sarah had polished—they might have offered an occasional subject of observation still, for many a mile, till the dusk was down, to the inside passenger who had sunk back with an ejaculation, looking about him bluntly and gruffly in the interior, after a somewhat challenging style, as if to defy all question. The red-faced elderly gentleman who had come in from the end of a lane, toward Chelmstone, attended by a man-servant with his luggage, and had immediately taken out a newspaper

to read all the way. He read it still, and read till it was dark.

But all the way, behind the screen of it, or in the dark afterwards, the old gentleman tended to sit bolt-upright; to be on the alert at a change of horses, to lean out and listen to inn-door dialogue with the coach-top, distincter through the obscurity; to notice who got down or came up; to be sure, by the lights of shop-windows or the flying light beyond clouds, that the coat-skirt and legs were still there; till he was felt to be a very disagreeable old gentleman indeed, for an inside fellow-passenger. At length, amidst lights and sounds that became innumerable, that lurid glimmering and murmuring which could not be mistaken, the stage-coach rolled off the road on to the perpetual causeway, then rattled in till it dared no longer if it could; for the sound was lost in roaring clamour, and, slowly threading its way through, it crept to its last inn-door, no more changing its horses. The hour was striking harshly down, over the wild Babel there. Eleven o'clock at night, from a steeple close at hand, which clock-around-clock had begun to make unmeaning, without need of that dreadful iron clang which smote above them like a merciless giant's blow, when Nugent, no doubt with a chill misgiving that made him shiver so, leapt down on the wet pavement under a lamp to take his purse out bravely, and first settle with the guard, then see what might be left for the coachman's "tip." He might well shiver a little; but the step was taken, the decisive note left, pride and shame behind him. To start, as he did, at a sudden touch on the shoulder, for all his bravery, was more singular—and to turn, so ready for suspicion, irritation, or self-possession, staring so amazed, yet by a "hush!" a friendly whisper, and a kindly-advising invitation, to be so thoroughly reassured, persuaded, and wiled over, into the "Buck's Head Inn," Borough, where the coach put up. Active as he might be, the elderly inside passenger had been out before him, knew

him, had by a natural coincidence come up to London by the same coach; and, so far from prying into his affairs, or wishing to betray his confidence, would not be able, for some days to leave Town again. But as for the coach-inn being expensive, that notion showed inexperience. Besides, if he had no objection to hear a fair proposal—a business proposal—the old gentleman had such a one to make, for it was not the first time he had noticed Nugent. He had heard of him. He had formed no small estimate of him. So Nugent settled with guard and coachman, and silently acceded to the invitation.

Far off, in the night, at Hinchbridge Grange, one heart, above all, was bitterly waking for him, and would wake till the dawn; not having this unsuspected rencontre to dream of, not thinking even of the old gentleman so much, as to know that he was absent from the end wing. The note, brought down faithfully by the pikeman's boy, had struck her with dismay and anguish; yet it was still before her, clasped sometimes to her, bringing blessings to him that he had at least written it, showing excuses for his rash conduct, saying he would soon write again, to tell where he had gone, how he fared. "Sir Thomas had quarrelled fiercely with the Squire—the Ashburtons themselves were not worth a thought—it was useless to hang on, depending on *patronage*—thinking of the Church, or India either. She was to keep her mind easy—he thought the best way was to save suspense or partings, which he didn't think" (a blot here, cruelly selfish as was the word) "he could stand. No use saying at present where he was gone to, the more as it was useless to oppose or send after him—but he would write whenever he had news"—and remained "Dear mother, yours affectionately, in great haste, N. S." "P.S."—the kindest but the falsest touch of the whole—"Well supplied with cash, through the kindness of a friend."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT EVERYTHING PREVIOUS HAD TENDED TO.

POOR Mrs. Smythe, even next day, concealed as much as she could, from others, the real direness and irrevocable nature of this catastrophe, under a guise of its being some mere escapade for the time, half known about by her, partly to be scolded at when Nugent should come back. Not at present to be allowed, by Jane or Lizzy, to get abroad, lest it might be fancied by other people a serious thing, likely to be permanent, and might then frighten him from returning at all. Possibly there was a sick, vague feeling that, when once known, it became the more of a reality—a dreadful daylight fact, perfectly understood by herself in the shade, with shutters closed on it still better understood—that Nugent had neither gone up to Cambridge nor set out to India, with all the difficulties and dangers of either at the best, but, alone and friendless, unpatronized, inexperienced, passionate, and desperate, had absolutely plunged amidst the entangling, overwhelming, fatal mysteries of the world. Not the slightest hint of an object, means, or profession—not so much as a syllable to indicate the particular precipice from which he had thrown himself headlong, or the quarter of that heaving abyss in which he had dived; so that despair itself might have strained its gaze towards the horizon for a glimpse of his rising head or floating garment.

It came out, however, as usual, somehow. At Hinchbrook Manor, when, in a day or two, it was heard of as a new freak—the youth's latest caprice—there was at least one to feel unpleasantly conscious, keeping the more silent as it lasted longer; while Mrs. Ashburton was not surprised, though confident there would soon be more of him, she hoped not *worse*; and the Squire was exceedingly annoyed, nay, sorry almost to self-accusation, but trying in a cheerful fashion to pooh-pooh it. As for connecting it with the new coach, or the few days' ab-

sence of Dr. Smith, with the loitering readiness of his man to do garden jobs or messages, *that* went very naturally beyond the joint acuteness of all Hinchbridge ; since the truth was, any such connection was of an accidental character, never striking little Lizzy, Sarah Flake, or the rural pikeman. There was at the worst a sort of notion that, in a few days, if the young man did not turn up personally, he would, at any rate, be heard of, or written from.

In a very few days, required by his usual business, if not by business augmented, came back Dr. Smith to the end wing of the Grange. Yet, quite as naturally as the rest, that circumstance did not alter matters. He could not help sharing everybody else's knowledge, of course ; the fact was before his eyes, at any rate. But if he had aught directly to say to it, the remark must have been delayed as premature, or as being yet a breach of confidence ; perhaps dependent on the post, for which he might have been noticed by Solomon to look with increased interest, if not with the painful anxiety of their neighbours hard by. Added to which, Mrs. Smythe herself, when seen, had a growing manner of acute and compressed intentness toward one point, like the instinct of a gentle creature brought to bay, which might turn and be fierce, as it was already cold to other matters, almost stern, certainly raised beyond any liberty or indignity. If she could for one moment have had a suspicion, as there was none for an instant conceivable in this case, about anyone having had to do with the taking away of her son Nugent from Hinchbridge—with the cruel pushing of him to extremity, with the causing of his determination to escape beyond knowledge, or his prolonged silence—if she had even thought any one knew so much as *she* did about it—still more, that any one knew further—then there was something in her hard, tearless, set, and waiting eye, that would have deterred the confession without some propitiatory proof of recompense. The example of Mr. Webb, the Curate, who had hastily come

over to call on her after the first news, was enough to scare most people ; and made Miss Margaret Ashburton secretly avoid coming in her way, if not be afraid lest she might already be suspected. Although similar reasons might conduce to little Lizzy becoming still more a favourite of that young lady's, so that Lizzy was often up, during those few days, at Hinchbrook Manor, sometimes with Jane, sometimes by herself, once or twice wondering at Maggie Ashburton, not so much for the kindness of her company homeward as for the excuses made against returning the visits, or coming no farther than the Grange gate. It was a good thing Mrs. Smythe had but one idea as yet—the post ; otherwise it might not have needed the girl's coming under the quick, maternal eye again to let a guilty consciousness be traced in mere quiverings of eyelids, flushes, blushes, hesitations, and evasions.

Into the very brunt of this danger the single-minded Curate, innocent by comparison, had one morning rushed. In his hurry to call on the doubly-bereaved mother of his late pupil, and disclaim all part in the influences leading to this occurrence, justifying himself, and eager to express his pain, his sympathy, his hopes, and consolations, the Reverend Adam Webb committed a gross mistake. Whether urged or not by another, whether taking his own venerable mother's counsel or not, that of Mrs. Deputy Webb—who ought to have understood her sex by that time—he showed an ignorance of the female character most unpardonable in a clergyman. If he had any last lingering hopes of a half-conscious, involuntary and secular kind, he thereby totally ruined them ; leaving the field to any rival whatsoever, not to speak of wealth, importance, or disencumbered condition in life. That these hopes had in any way prompted the Curate, or even accompanied them, is a supposition by no means compatible with his ingenuous, sincere, Christian character ; indeed, if he had entertained them in connection with the visit, the very simplest man would have had the gift of worldly cunning so far bestowed on

him, as to have delayed the visit for a few days. At least till she had been known to have had a letter, and been known to admit the full reality of the departure, giving way, and weeping, and seeking a confidant and consoler. He did in all essentials the very reverse. He came striding down from the parsonage by the nearest out, his skirts flying, the heat of the day marked on his countenance, knocking loudly ; and without consulting the oracular gravity of Sarah's aspect, wishing to see Mrs. Smythe—if she were alone—for a minute—not to detain her—no—no tidings—one moment's explanation—a single word ! He was shown into the parlour, and found no one in it—only something of an ominous quiet, disorder, yet preparation. The portrait, that dignified portrait, opposite which he had found a pleasure in sitting, unlike Mr. Price, and contemplating the deceased Rector, drawing the discourse freely to his reputation and excellences—now stared upon him. Almost a frown, he could have imagined, darkened the well-exposed surface of the brow, over which the powdered wig arose more awfully than before ; recalling forgotten circumstances to his mind, such as undue praise of mathematics for distinction in military matters, the indulgence to fancies about India, the allowance of vacillation about the church, the very Christmas homily, the snow-scenes, the permitted offence to Sir Thomas ; possibly the self-suspicion itself, of an insidious growth of sentiments behind them all, that were neither pastoral nor preceptorial, but blameably savouring of the natural and evil. He should have examined himself beforehand. As the door opened he started aghast, and poured forth his stammering perturbation of mind to her. She bid him take a chair, giving him one at last ; sitting down herself, and listening to him, out to the end. When he was done, she was self-possessed, and pitilessly collected. She was altogether unconvinced, hearing rather her own thoughts than his replies ; taking up her last thread where civility had obliged it to be left, and going on

again ; never refuted, always answering, ever repeating, reasoning like a woman. There was some one somewhere or other, to be revenged upon ; and the Curate was found *he*. Therefore Mrs. Smythe was not only unjust to him, but angry at his proofs. So much the worse if her son had been really of brilliant parts ; if mathematics were what was said ; if he had been altogether unsettled as to any choice at all, by having his first choices humoured. At the demonstration that he had not set off for India, nor left for Cambridge in a playful secrecy, she was the more resentful, because she wished to believe it, but could not. When it was suggested that he was certain to try his fortune in London, since London was the world, she evinced absolute contempt, for she was not so ignorant as not to have guessed that. And at the hope that she would soon hear, at least, her indignation at its being *a hope*, at there being even a doubt implied of Nugent's doing *more* than write—his returning, in short, speedily, to fix on a profession with some experience, providing for regular and frequent visits to his home—this was scornful to the verge of good manners. As to kindness, it was gone. She was all the while to the end growing more cruel, until in the very expressions of trust that they could still regard him as a pastor, being occasionally honoured by his visits in that capacity, and with the less painful recollection when her son should have returned—there came something like the keenest and cruellest stab of all. For in the extremity of toleration and admission, not to say humble endurance, there will come an ejaculation of provoked self-defence from the mildest man, for a moment tempted to break through all ceremony ; and when the Curate had turned back from the door, merely to ask pardon for that sudden manner, without trusting his own eye or hand to ratify the petition, a whole series of traits and tones on his part must have rushed back on the lady's memory, showing some patient indulgent things in the light of sacrifice—since she coloured over all her face, to

the very ears, then drew back as pale in proportion, making a cold, dead pause, saying nothing, letting him go unexcused, never to ask her pardon again. Mr. Webb almost forgot his hat as he rushed forth, striding out, speeding he seemed not to know where, as if to some forgotten sick-bed at the parish bounds. His umbrella he *had* forgotten, in the passage stand ; nor might it even have been got back again, but for the thoughtful care of Sarah that evening. Afternoon it had become, during the interview ; as they had vainly talked and argued, risen in agitation by turns, by turns sat down again, or both risen and sat, for hours of the summer day.

✱ By means such as this, however, does blind pain get hold of something like a sentient head to tear at, knocking it as often as may be against the sides of the cave. The Cyclops of the mother's distress became then somewhat liker ordinary mortals in the dark, with somebody else's troubles near, other people's feelings to wonder at ; the certainty dawning before it, of the next post, which *must*—must this time bring the letter. Ruck and Co.'s letters, once wished for, had never been looked to as was that evening's post, certain to bring Nugent's letter. The usual hour came, and pretty punctual to it came the now-frequent post-woman with that queer rusty-brown spencer, and those wooden clogs and grey leggings ; a pock-marked woman, taciturn and phlegmatic, only frequent to Dr. Smith's. Detestably pock-marked, phlegmatic, taciturn, frequent and punctual, and all the rest, she as usual, nevertheless, had still the assurance to march in to Dr. Smith's door, and march out again without further ado. Did the woman absolutely reach the pitch, that evening, of delivering Mrs. Smythe's letters at Dr. Smith's, as if she, Mrs. Smythe, were nobody ? Mrs. Smythe rang the bell for Sarah, and in a lofty manner ordered her to go straight to that other door, and ask that man, that Solomon, if there was not a letter—by some strange mistake, a letter—for *Mrs.* Smythe ? And Sarah not venturing to answer, did so.

Hopelessly, no doubt. They had waited and looked, morning after morning, evening upon evening. The post-woman was not a woman who made mistakes, nor Solomon the kind of man. He readily assured her, and showed, to satisfy her, that there were none. Dr. Smith had but two or three days been back, and was not then in—not back from a walk.

Why was Mrs. Smythe waiting for Sarah's return *in the kitchen*? In the kitchen, not turning to her when she came with the answer; not wishing to hear it, by that sign of her hand; nor venturing to meet Sarah's anxious, thoughtful, conjecturing, though still too respectful eye. Her mistress was standing looking into the kitchen fire, and she put her hand against the kitchen-chimney-piece to support herself, then all at once sat down feebly on the nearest seat, a common kitchen stool, which Sarah would fain have wiped for her, but was responded to by a single look instead. At that, Mrs. Smythe gave way and altogether broke down to Sarah. So that the woman began to cry also, rubbing into either eye her striped working-apron, while with the other she helped to indicate that she knew the reason, and saw how things really stood: till she ran and shut the kitchen door, whereupon her mistress no longer concealed anything from her, but cried freely along with her, taking in all her untutored aggravations of the case, which dwelt so upon Nugent's qualities, his looks, his ways, all that could make the loss more vivid. She drank greedily of the ignorant excuses for him, and the absurd imputations to others; receiving, as if it had been the height of sagacity, a counsel to get Mr. Price's young man employed in the matter, with his advertisements in the papers—or a reward offered, or a search through London, or something; yet at the same time most inconsistently consoled by the firm assurance that a rapid fortune would be made by Master Nugent, without speaking of the powerful friends he was certain to have found already, and the something that would soon take

place, as sure as dreams could be read, or the grounds in a tea-cup interpreted, to bring him back and make them all happy ever after. Sarah herself had dreamt lately of a funeral-company dispersing, which was allowed to signify a happy meeting ; and having, therefore, consulted the other mode of augury, had found undoubted tokens of a long journey and a great person, with much trouble in consequence, and two fair people and a dark one, and a present at the end. All *before* the misfortune, though brought to mind by it, and thus manifestly begun to be explained : which did not fail to strike them both as so remarkable, that they were still considering it, when a tap came to the back-door of the scullery. Not loud, though peculiar, and at any rate amidst full light from the summer evening, its suddenness might yet have startled Mrs. Smythe, but for Sarah's perfect understanding, as she said it was only " Mr. Sol, from the Doctor's."

She went to answer it without letting their privacy be broken, and after a little, with a face quite cleaned on the way (probably before opening), returned to state that it was nothing but a kettle of hot water that was wanted. The fire, round the corner, naturally went out sometimes, more especially in summer ; but the Doctor had heated himself walking, and it was rather a dewy evening, so that he had come back chilled, in fact liable to one of his sore throats, that were apt to be serious. " Pray, pray, lose no time, then, Sarah !" said Mrs. Smythe, hastening to compose herself and retire ; while the kettle was being blown hot. She even laid aside her own troubles for a minute or two, looking out with concern towards the corner, round which Solomon's steps had retreated. " Dear me, if he were taken really ill !" she added. " Without attendance, except that odd-looking man—so solitary, too, close beside us. Do oblige them with anything you can, Sarah—offer your own help, if necessary. Indeed—were it actually serious—I—I should at once have no hesitation in—in en-

deavouring to go myself." Sarah did not think there was the least need to think of that, amongst Mrs. Smythe's own distress, too. An egg or two, dropped in a hot cup of coffee—with perhaps a little of the black currant jelly that did good before—that was the most: and if it hadn't been for the going up to the parsonage just before, with Mr. Webb's umbrella that he forgot, she would have had the water ready boiling to take in. It was the first time Mrs. Smythe had known about the umbrella; and by her look of regretful anxiety, her checked interrogatory remark, her silent retreat, and subsequent activity to get the jelly and see that the eggs were fresh, it might have been judged there were relents as well as kindness mingled with her private pain.

It was getting dusk; a dull, stirless, truly damp and unseasonable evening of the early summer, when Mrs. Smythe came and sat down again in the parlour, trying to settle at needlework as Lizzy was settled at her painting, near her, by the garden window. Jane was out at tea; engaged, it seemed, to visit Mrs. Deputy Webb before the last occurrence, of which neither she nor the old lady could know much; glad, no doubt, to cheer herself anyhow from a weight of discomfort if not sorrow. It was a satisfaction, on the whole, that accidental whereabouts of Jane. It was a consideration whether she would not get wet, and Sarah would have to go for her, on every account: for a small drizzle of summer rain began to steal down with the dusk, creeping small about every leaf, with a nibbling whisper—"edax imber"—while mist spread from tree to tree, the garden bushes steamed, the hedge dripped, nestling sparrows chirped discontentedly in the ivy. Lizzy was the only companion, and Lizzy was silent. Whether from pleasant absorption in painting an auricula from nature before her paper, or through a deeper sympathy, she kept mute. Occasional glances were stolen up, it was true, from under the fair stooped brow, and the bright hair that had so profusely troublesome a look: nevertheless,

the plump red cheek set itself always down again steadily, to achieve some higher triumph over the difficulties of transference, between a mimic auricula half-done, and a richly velvet-brown one, inexplicably dusty as the sun had left it ere the dew began : the soft little figure—scarce so full as when first brought to the Grange, though grown a good deal—wriggled itself into self-control ; and the wistful grey eyes got absorbed as before, with a wavy full-shaped head bent to the matter, cherubically large and capable, like a superior thing which Lizzy had to grow to, ere she should lose childhood and become a genius. Was it, after all, only because tea had been actually forgotten, for themselves ; and because Lizzy, amidst all troubles, could yet miss her tea greatly, with the appertaining viands ? since she was still fond, if more shyly than before, of all good things, sweetmeats, or comfits. She must, nevertheless, have suspected there was no letter from Nugent ; therefore of what use was it to talk ? Nobly pursuing her mental track of relief, she did not yield until the light failed to show difference between colours ; then sat up, laid down the brush, and at last coughed. A repetition of that sound drew notice to her, then to the open casement. As her mother hastily closed it, she said, “Nugent is sure to write, you know, mamma—but till he had something particular to write about, perhaps he wants to save postages. Perhaps he may have written already, but he’s posted it too late. Perhaps he sent it by coach, and the coach comes later. It’s late already. It’s so late, I wonder Jane isn’t back yet—for she must have had tea long before this !” To corroborate her, the church-clock struck ; and Mrs. Smythe found out that they had not had tea, scarce so much her own forgetfulness as Sarah’s.

Sarah, rung for, appeared, however. As to Dr. Smith, he was better. She brought in the tray at last, with the candles ready to light ; and she was to leave them, and go for Miss Jane, but on the way—a thought which

Lizzy had suggested—was to call at Mr. Muggops's and see if there were any coach-letter or parcel. So she went off, with basket and umbrella, cloak and pattens ; and Lizzy would have to attend to the door, as she had to light the candles, to shut the shutters and draw the curtains. Lizzy paused snugly while she was doing this, gazing out for contrast a moment through the uncomfortable twilight, with half-closed shutters behind her, not to see the deceptive image of their candles reflected in it, nor into the Doctor's very sitting-room, with themselves, perhaps, beside the image. It was his own first dreary twinkle that she saw, through the great old room ; and instead of the blinds going down till more light was brought, the dreary twinkle was put out—as if to go to bed, as if his newspaper were early finished, as if he had had nothing else but that to save him from the terrible extremity. Yet she had scarce spoken of it, when to their joint wonder—nay, almost dismay—the subject of their concern emerged abruptly from his door, in great-coat, hat, and gaiters, shutting it behind him, putting up his umbrella, putting on his gloves, as if bound for a nocturnal expedition, and with that hoarseness which could still be known as he hemmed. He glanced about him, so that they shrunk out of the risk of observation ; he put on his gloves slowly, with 'still more of that uncertain, irresolute manner he had shown most since he came back. Then at last, he took to his feet, and trudged off most determinedly round the corner, toward the gate.

Lizzy gave a great panting breath, and closed up the window. Mrs. Smythe sank back in her chair surprised, concerned, almost alarmed. But she had to make the tea, and they did their best to forget the matter, and also to look cheerful about other things. All at once, however, there came a sound at the front-door which made Lizzy jump, and her mother really start, both looking at each other—a knock that was in itself like an advantage taken of their situation, when everybody else was

out, even the Doctor's man, and the Doctor too,—a knock full of character besides, so as not to be mistaken for anybody else's. Mrs. Smythe turned pale, for a moment or two trembling a little; while Lizzy was slowly devoting herself to the occasion: till it came again, less abrupt and hurried, but equally distinct and decided, only with a more re-assuring, business-like deliberateness. At which the little girl bore her candlestick onward, with the less hesitation, as her mother anticipated it by hastening past to the door. Outside was a moist umbrella, and a buttoned great-coat with a pair of brown-gaitered legs, steadily waiting for the response, and belonging, of course, to no other than Dr. Smith; whose eyes blinked at the light when he looked up. The slight surprise made him naturally draw back and stammer in his intended inquiry for the mistress or the mamma. "It was—a—a—mere trifle—partly, in fact, regarding the house, there—the slightest matter in the world, but a—a word or two would do. He should like to see Mrs. Smythe about it, a moment—if it didn't interrupt her, that was?"

Cordially invited in, to the parlour, Dr. Smith took the offered chair; shifting it back, however, in a sort of alarm, from all proximity to the tea-table, which had embarrassed his manner the more. He carefully held his hat, and even retained his umbrella, although the slight dripping of the latter upon the carpet caused him some obvious uneasiness, till he had ingeniously contrived to place the former as a receptacle for any such moisture. He gave a loud "hem," as was to have been expected, his voice being husky still—not hastening to enter upon his business, however, but rather to remark upon the state of the weather, which it was curious he should call fine. Nevertheless an opportunity was thus afforded for Mrs. Smythe, by expressions of pleasure at his having escaped the threatened attack of so serious a complaint, to attempt setting the visitor at ease. Her further suggestion as to the advisableness

of being careful—her transition to general topics or local matters—fell blank for all that : he still sat awkwardly on his chair, as if the omission to use the passage-mat for his feet were troubling him, or he wished to avoid any vulgar appearance of noticing the furniture ; with the greater difficulty, because, if he looked to Mrs. Smythe, the mantel-piece faced him, and *there*, over their heads, was the finest piece of furniture in the room—the well-painted family portrait, which surveyed everybody in that direction with two calm, fixed, yet following eyes.

After another vehement clearing of the throat, without any reference to Mrs. Smythe's conversational remarks, her visitor broke straight off into business. He " had thoughts of some little alterations *in* the premises he occupied—hoping for no objection on her part ? " " Greatly obliged—very much obliged indeed—for her readiness so far as she was concerned. Of course—of course—the landlord would have to be satisfied, which could be managed through Mr. Price. The fact was, he wished to be permanent, if agreeable—and of course the terms—that was taken for granted—Mr. Price would settle these matters—yes—yes—certainly—out of the question otherwise ! But he had been desirous—he—he, in fact, wished—— " Here Dr. Smith became again confused, hurriedly stealing out his watch under one hand, and looking at it, with an ill-affected start as if to go ; on the whole betraying himself very clumsily, as not inaccessible to persuasion, if the business were despatched and were yet half a pretext for further acquaintance. " Such an hour to call, though—really preposterous, except on the excuse of being out early for the day—a good deal of other business at present—some morning before long, perhaps—— "

He was getting to his feet, but Mrs. Smythe had begun with so friendly an air to pour out a dish of tea, saying with so kindly a smile, as Lizzy took and carried it carefully along, that they chanced to be later than

usual, while the kind of night made it no superfluity to take the meal over again—as quite to subjugate the old gentleman. Notwithstanding his resolute negative and emphatic deprecation, the Doctor had sat mechanically down again to receive the grave gift from Lizzy's hands ; which, with the same silent seriousness, took in exchange, from his, the burdensome hat and umbrella : then removing them to a chair in the corner, she returned with a well-behaved air to her seat. The conversation bade fair to grow livelier. Depressed as were her own spirits, Mrs. Smythe exerted herself to draw out the talk of country matters, of their mutual friend Mr. Price, of Chelmstone business, of small village affairs. It almost led her to something like gossip, and the old gentleman's disposition seemed to tend that way ; nay, the well-bred accordance of the lady brought out a decided bent for action, and liking for management, that appeared characteristic of the elderly bachelor ; till matters of importance stirred up an impetuosity in him, an interest in the subject, and an eagerness to have his own way, amidst which he got by degrees nearer to the table, finally not objecting to one cup more. They agreed wonderfully so far, indeed. More irritable feelings against certain individuals, subsequently, there began to come ; and Mrs. Smythe was contented to insinuate a gentler view. She did, certainly, think it soon rather odd, that he let out hints of his own plans, in which she had no concern ; getting every moment more significant, as the first constraint wore off, with regard to projects which appeared scarce less sanguine and beyond reasonable means, than they seemed private, and unbecoming for her to offer any judgment upon whatever. Continuing sedulously polite in her necessary replies, she was yet impressed by this growing strangeness of manner, with some alarm—wishing that Sarah might not be much longer out, with Jane in addition. When he pressed for an opinion as to the eligibility of The Grange as a mansion-house—a family residence, in short—with

a bow-window or two thrown out, a whole new wing added—what style she could fancy for the portico, and whether the taking down of the present partition would not allow a capital library to be made (preserving the old fashion, of course), from his own sitting-room and the closets—*then*, really, Mrs. Smythe felt a degree of agitation she could scarce repress much longer. Her reserved answer served but faintly to conceal it. It was not a whimsical eccentricity merely, she felt sure: for his eye was purposing, to her instinctive sense, some yet more startling announcement, and once or twice, as if he thought of it all the while and watched her cautiously, the glance wandered from beyond her head to Lizzy, taking strange notice of *her*. He faltered on a sudden, ceased to speak, and steadily surveying the little girl, took out his yellow silk pocket-handkerchief, and blew a sound like a trumpet. He had been edging his chair always nearer to Lizzy, he was fumbling in his great-coat pocket to get out something, with which—just as every tea-cup, glass, or salver on the side-table was still ringing to the sound that made her bounce on her seat—he made an abrupt dart into her very hand. With both his, he pressed it close in, until Lizzy shrank no longer. Then he looked away, keeping hold of her still—and Mrs. Smythe's consternation, talking ever faster to keep him calm, became a silent amaze. A packet it was that Lizzy opened out with a burning face—of great snowy sugar-plums, bright lozenges, and coloured comfits all powdery with sweetness.

"Yes! Yes, ma'am," said the strange Doctor, vehemently, "true—true—you express my own notions—scarce a shade between us, I do believe, setting aside a little difference in the—the name—and we've been neighbours long enough, you and I, ma'am, to—to know each other! Yes, I say,"—and he rose up, drawing Lizzy with him as he approached, "why shouldn't we be friends, and—in fact—a—a—well, I may have gone wrong about it, but my meaning was good, and—no use

keeping it back longer, if I could—I'm old Joshua Smith—plain Josh, who made his first money by hard work, and his fortune by drugs and pills—your good husband's brother, my dear madam. This is my own niece. She's like him—like him—*like*, Mrs. Smith. The picture there—well the picture's like—but he was different to *my* eyes—handsomer—before he went to college." He stood looking up at it. *James, James!*—After he went to college, he never spoke fairly to me. Never called me Josh after that. I never called him Jem, after.—I was his only brother, though! Aye.—Don't, don't, ma'am—there's a dear soul! If I'd known what it was to see crying, I'd have been more straightforward. But I came down here on purpose. I wanted to—to feel my way."

His younger brother's widow, seated before him, looked up very gravely from her tears. One sob, and she was firm, raising herself erect, and meeting his troubled interest rather coldly. "It was somewhat late," she feared. "It was certainly a surprise, and—and an unexpected kindness—but the advantage—the only good—was lost."

"Don't say it, sister Mary," said Dr. Smith vehemently, while he began to pace the room in a hurried manner. "Not a whit of it. I'll—I'll astonish you yet! Talk of old Singleton, aye, or that old muff-headed baronet yonder—the whole tribe of Deanes notwithstanding, I'll match 'em for ye! As for the Squire's lady, puffed-out as she may be, you'll hold your head up with her ere long."

"Nugent—I have lost Nugent—my boy, my pride!" ejaculated Mrs. Smythe, bitterly. "He has madly left me, no doubt forced by our lot, upon a headlong, hopeless enterprise. Worse even than India,—a thousand times worse than the humblest curacy, the commonest mercantile situation. Shame and pride, if nothing else, amongst the dangers, the temptations he is exposed to—will keep him away. All else is indifferent *now*—he has

not yet even written to me, to tell where he has gone!" She covered her face with her hands, and Dr. Smith stopped short and stared down upon her.

"Why, what on earth—I—I should perhaps have mentioned," he said, confusedly, "that I went up to Town—by the merest chance, though—in the same coach, and so lighted upon him. As for his writing since, he has had enough to do, I assure you—till yesterday, when of course he wrote to say the ship was all right. I thought *that* was the main point to tell you—and *of course* there is a note enclosed now, for yourself. You may be sure I brought it. He might think, possibly, I was to explain sooner about our chance meeting—but the truth is, you know, I didn't for a moment breathe one whisper of our relationship to *him*. No. Certainly not. Of course not. Not on any consideration, till he comes back to this country. A warm uncle—a substantial firm, with the head quarter so close a connection—his employers his relation, ma'am! No—no. I like him too well for that—I want him to feel his own weight, find his own bottom, and see the world a couple of years for himself."

Mrs. Smythe, waiting for the precious enclosure which Dr. Smith looked out in his pocket-book, repeated faintly the words, "*Come back to this country?—the ship!—a couple of years?*"

"Yes—just so. Exactly. His own choice, I assure you, sister Smith, and with a very good allowance, too," was the deliberate though kindly-toned answer, as he handed over the letter with some care, indicating that, however small, it might contain what was valuable. "Advances would no doubt be made for outfit and so on, of which, if the boy be what I hope he is, you'll find some share enclosed." Heedless of that, she broke the seal and laid it open, to pore with eager eyes upon the few lines in that well-known dashing hand. A small folded paper dropped, as much owing, in all probability, to dimightedness as haste; but Dr. Smith picked it up,

glancing at it with an approving nod, before he laid it safely by her. "If it had been signed," remarked he, with a humour which drew no notice unless from Lizzy, "by *Ruck & Co.*, I suspect Master Nugent might have been harder to manage. But we were up to the matter, and allowed for a little high-mindedness—which was excusable. He's proud, ma'am—but I don't think the less of him for it, seeing there's something to be proud about—no, we chartered the vessel ourselves in great part, as well as insured it, but it belongs to a friend—and till they'd sailed, which was to-day, he wouldn't know but what he was our friend's supercargo, rather than *ours*."

"To-day ! To-day !" faltered the mother. "Sailed—sailed ? For two years." She sat and wept unrestrainedly, though silently.

"Wind and weather permitting—yes. My good lady—Mrs. Smythe—consider. A fine ship—a barque, rather, I should say—but A 1, well found and appointed,—bound round the Horn at the very best season, for a perfectly fresh market in the Pacific ports of South America—his charge on board merely nominal, ma'am—messing with the captain, officers, and surgeon—time to see the world and get business knowledge till they get to real work—real—real, I assure you, amidst all sorts of life and experience ! Why, it's the making of him, my dear friend ! There's a Peruvian mine to see to, where we've shares to dispose of, if we find proper—then they've word of a fresh discovery in dye-wood—there's bark, there's gum—not to mention a new sort of article to fill up their home-freight, rather a speculation, possibly, but may make a fortune of itself. A perfect fortune for all concerned—all, ma'am !" Here Lizzy, at any rate, opened her eyes, coming closer again to where he had sat down rather discomfited. "How, how ! What was it ?" she asked, gazing straight at him. "A thing, the captain tells me," resumed her newly-found uncle, gladly having recourse to her, "worth its weight in gold, if worth a penny—

and it's to be shovelled up for the lifting, on desert islands, where the birds leave it—yes, birds! I'll have it tried on Poplar Farm, which your friend the Squire's just sold me—and in two years, you know—two years—won't your brother be of age, about, Miss?" "Nugent is five years and a half older than me, sir," answered Lizzy promptly: "and I'm thirteen past!" "I thought so—I guessed as much—he'll be *almost of age* when he comes back! And then—and *then*"—the old gentleman stopped, however, meeting her intense interest with a look half cunning, half bashful still. "Is your name—a—I mean I don't so much as know how to call you, little Miss? If I thought, even, you could—could keep a secret?" He was only keeping hold of her hand at arm's-length, shyly, scarce liking to look at her long, reddening if he did: and Lizzy's grave grey eyes surveyed him with a momentary perplexity then, till an arch smile rose to them from the dimpled cheek as she told her name, the fond diminutive of it only. Keep a secret?" she said too: "yes, I can, Uncle Joshua. Of course."

Mrs. Smythe, ceasing to grieve as she attended, or noticed them, could not but smile as Lizzy graciously moved closer, and stooped down her ear with the unruly hair held off it, toward the serious attitude and flushed visage of Dr. Smith. He did whisper to her, very earnestly and secretly. "What!" ejaculated Lizzy, with eyes glittering-out amaze and joy. "And the Grange too! This house? Oh! Mamma!" "You—you little one, you are a blab!" returned the Doctor, softly. "Like your foolish old uncle. There was far more than that, though, to surprise him when he comes back, and—and I see I must not tell you, yet—Lizzy!" He gulped out that last word, looking across half-frightened at it to Mrs. Smythe, from whose expression there must have been something to re-assure him: for with a sudden movement, it were hard to say whether most bold or most bashful, the old man seized his little niece convul-

sively, lifting her, as if she had required a giant effort, to his knee. There, with one arm keeping her, his face very red, he ventured to put the other hand on her shining locks, to part and stroke them down, though she sat the most composed of the three by far. "They sail under convoy, Mrs. Smythe," he awkwardly went on, "as safe as churches—and by the time things are ripe, here—I mean, you know, before we can commence operations—Mr. Price, I should say, you understand, would agree with me as to the propriety, ma'am, of—of keeping quiet. But as regards the coming-of-age, and the property qualification; I can most certainly assure you, sister-in-law——"

What the extrication could have been, or the close of a dilemma which every tick of his own watch or striking of the staircase clock rendered more embarrassing, is a question disposed of by the most natural of incidents. Lizzy, looking sideways up at him, might well wonder if he was to stay with them henceforth, if Sol was to become forthwith a member of the household, if they were quite at once to fall into new habits, without arrangement, without a spare bedroom being ready, without Jane, or even Sarah, having the least notion of what had happened—when the sounds of Jane and Sarah at the front-door made them all look strange. She would have slid off of her own accord, but her uncle's hurry was too fast for her. He turned but a moment to print on her plump cheek a sudden, surprising, agitated, yet most undeniable kiss—then hastily pressing her mother's hand, with some muttered words about the ice being broken, and time enough to-morrow, caught his hat and umbrella, and bustled out. In the dark lobby he passed Jane and the maid servant before they had time to take alarm, or to wonder long who it might be.

CHAPTER XVII.

RESULTS THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED—OCCURRENCES ALSO, WHICH COULD NOT.

"WELL, Solomon," said his master, one morning not very long after, before the latter stepped into the chaise at the Grange gate, to be driven to Chelmstone as usual, "what does your wife say to it? She overlooks your peccadillo, I dare say—in the way of a little equivocation, we'll call it, as to your whereabouts—never mind—you'd have been elsewhere, as you remarked, if not in the country, here. If you even made her aware of it, which I didn't at least *request* you?"

"No—you didn't," was the blunt reply. "What was wished, was to know if she'd come down to Hinchbridge, to the Grangery, and try a cook's place with Madam Smythe, at Michaelmas term."

"Ah," said Dr. Smith, "till then the alterations won't be finished, you know."

"Things 'll be different, then," rejoined Solomon more cheerfully. "I wrote as much, and she'll try it. She'll come down when wrote for. Here's the answer at any rate." And he gave the letter to the Doctor, who glanced at it. "If you choose, Solomon, you may go up express to Town yourself, a little before, and bring her with you. I dare say I could spare you a few days about that time."

"It's the Fair time, then," answered Solomon, doubtfully. "Chelmstone Fair. Well, I'd rather not miss the Fair, Doctor, if it's the same thing to you."

"Before it, then," said the Doctor kindly. Solomon was annoyed. "I don't care about fairs for her," said he: "she'd only be in the way sooner, Mr. Smith. No use about the house till things are ready, I'd say. She'd be wanting me to take her to the Fair, and they say this season it's to be uncommon. It's not that I want to shirk, mind, Governor—nor put her off—quite different—I think if she was here, we'd manage to settle—I'm

somehow taking more to the place, myself, sir. Might get to like it, if I was let alone. If I was going up to 'Town, too, soon again, I mightn't. It's safer. Bless ye, Doctor, she'll come down by coach herself at Michaelmas, when wanted—all safe."

Dr. Smith looked at him narrowly, and unintelligible as the man's objection was, saw that he did not waver or pretend to yield; as he would have done had he meant bad faith. To the firm of Ruck & Co., still more to the principal of that firm individually, he had ever been faithful, indeed, since they had taken him up and known him; he had evinced a dog-like consciousness that, under their eye, or near them, he was alone kept from some houseless, homeless, outcast fatality of his own; and had with their knowledge married his wife, and had been regular in the due allotments to her, punctual in his returns home, and periodically content to make it his lodging as long as business required, if not just to spend his leisure there. As for his leisure, it was evidently no delight to him; his absences—except at times a sight-seeing evening or so, a rare night of social excess after long intervals, ended at worst by a blank of lock-up and fine, with a morning reference to Ruck & Co.—could all be accounted for in the books of the Firm; so might his small balances of wages, not more than enough for pocket-money, and the better guaranteed by an occasional deficiency, slight advance, or trivial defalcation, arithmetically inexplicable by himself. It was like Solomon's helplessness in arithmetical explanations, proving intended honesty—when he thus stood out absurdly dogged upon any matter. Only when he approached the semblance of plausibility, as ever and anon in less commercial and more ethical things—was suspicion due from one who knew him.

"Very well—be it so," impatiently concluded Dr. Smith, stepping into his vehicle, all the better satisfied. "Drive on, then—drive on, sir. Have your own way." He liked his own, though, very much. When thwarted

anyhow in it, he vented himself the more in finding fault where there seemed a right to it; in calling out to Solomon not to drive as if he were driving a hearse, in indignation at his delay near the Hall lodge because a carriage was coming out, forsooth! Bailiff Sloane, on his white pony, rode past the other way, with a baffled scowl—doubtless because of the established discovery, that Dr. Smith was Dr. Smith in reality, and could unite his household with Mrs. Smythe's, defiant of Sir Thomas, likely to get better acquainted with the Squire—the purchaser of Poplar Farm, the proprietor of the Grange, nay, terrifying Mayor Singleton by a hint about post-office letters, absolutely implying the baronet to be art-and-part, and stopping the wall across Chipping Lane, and meaning to have it thrown open as a path—a road—a cart-way and a thoroughfare for chaise or gig. Yet why did Solomon, the craven, give that bailiff so much room—manifestly, from the bailiff's half-gratified air, remembering the horsewhip and the stocks, with abject feelings up there on the dickey—so as to force the Doctor himself to thrust forth a flaming face, shaking his fist backward, at Sloane, as much as to say there was more in store for him! He gave Solomon a bit of his mind too. And when Solomon, driving into Chelmstone, took the nearest though least conspicuous way by a back-lane, to the dyery, Dr. Smith called him in plain words a fool, telling him that *he*, too, wanted his own way. Sol had to turn back that day, and almost for the first time take a main street, which he was ever after to take—which bore them glaring in yellow paint, drab livery, and reddened visage with white cravat and breast-frill, past shop-windows, past the post-office, the Town-hall and Market-place, right before the brewery-gates to the meeting-house alley and the back slums of the dyery yard, by the canal basin. Obediently docile, save on that one forward point—singularly quiet and unobtrusive otherwise—disposed to give in, and settle down, and become gradually steady in everything else, as he really

was in it—Solomon did not take this ill from his master. It did not in the least hinder him from taking manifest pleasure in the changes now accelerated in the borough town ; the new brick cottages for work-people, building on the ground of Mayor Singleton's old houses, and where the rickety sheds had stood, belonging once to the Corporation ; with the foundations of the still newer dissenting chapel, that were traced out, and soon to rise staring-red before the Brewer's counting-house windows. Changes at Hinchbridge itself—and they promised to be not only many, but rapid—gave him, at all events, an obvious amusement. They all helped to keep him from wearying. They must have more and more enabled him to look forward to settling down. No wonder if he secretly did not care to leave. The expectations of the fair were nothing to the expectations from *them*, and really both he and Mrs. Solomon might be well pleased with the prospect.

The changes might be expected to utterly defeat and drive away Sir Thomas Deane, to his place in Kent. Though as yet they only irritated him, every day with some aggravation, till the sulky silence of all the Hall-people became ominous, as if they were waiting their moment for a great stroke of demolition and vengeance. At the last crowning change for the present, Sir Thomas became still as the hour before thunder, while Bailiff Sloane, like an old wild boar, gnashed his teeth and stood to bay. For the Squire dismissed further ceremony, one fine morning, and walking over at his leisure from Hinchbrook, called upon Dr. Smith in person, to get better acquainted. It was not then so much Dr. Smith alone, at whom wrath was sworn, as Mr. Ashburton himself. The Doctor's money, even in the eyes of the baronet and his bailiff, had turned out to be a very considerable thing at the lowest estimate, and he was making more : to make it was his object, though he had his whims and hobbies ; nor was his temper inaccessible to terms of truce, his course fixed, his politics anything.

A positive ally he might be yet, were he but humoured and flattered; the Squire never again. He gave signs of absolute political defection, and of unprincipled veering round. He found Dr. Smith at home, and staid with him, talking, discussing, conversing more and more pleasantly, for a whole forenoon. Notwithstanding a first bristling-up of all the old gentleman's prejudices, bluntly premising ignorance of literature, indifference to the fine arts, no ear for music, with hints that they had better avoid politics—yet Mr. Ashburton was struck by that shrewd practicability of the Doctor. The moment they got on science, they gained a mutual animation, for the last published transactions of the Royal Society were on the tables of both, newly cut up, recently devoured; and both dabbled in experiments, both were enthusiasts in their several ways; each a novice as to some department, of which the other could tell best. From an interview that left them both looking in haste at their watches, they parted, startlingly far on in acquaintance. And in a day or two, by accident somehow, they met upon their walks; so that they were seen slowly talking their way along into the very entrance of the village. Now, to Mrs. Ashburton the rich Doctor was a very different matter from Mrs. Smythe: the one genteel, but in reduced circumstances, with a family that embarrassed people how to treat them; the other, not so much vulgarish as eccentric, a whimsically-wilful man, whose very breaches of manners had almost a superior air, whose oddities and absences of mind were impressive, whose overbearingness lordly. *She* it was, not her husband, who first broached the idea—distantly, of course, as a thing that some day might be unavoidable, a piece of propriety—of asking him to dinner. The Squire was exceedingly dull to those hints. As usual, when hinted to, he did not take it up or accede to it till fairly and plainly stated: nay, when he agreed, somewhat in a hesitating style, he seemed to dream for a moment that it was to be the Doctor alone!

But although not as yet established in one single household with Mrs. Smythe, his sister-in-law, till the alterations could be completed,—every day was verging to that point. Other and grander alterations in the structure of the old Grange were talked of, with alterations, too, which might in time imply a coach-house and double-stalled stable. Meanwhile Dr. Smith's dressing-gown and slippers might not be out of the end wing ; but his evening hearth-side was there. The workmen threatened ere long, in fact, to force them all within less compass for the time ; now here, now there, they had to shift already. The partition was down ; sometimes the large old sitting-room was the parlour ; the parlour, again, fell into abeyance till a bay-window and a piece off the passage made it a dining-room indeed. Mrs. Smythe, with her needlework and gentle ways, waiting for the first ship-letter from Nugent, was growing necessary to the old bachelor, daily more so. She was scarce so impatient as he for that first ship-letter ; nor when he made up his first packet for the ship-postage, that was to inclose her first letter to Nugent, did she make so much ado about it, nor write nearly so long an epistle, with so many postscripts and appendixes. She did not pet Lizzy as he did, nor indulge her so much. Not that he neglected Jane, really appearing prouder of her in the first new silk frock he presented, than of Lizzy ; calling her prettier, sending for more things to town on her account, by far ; in turn, also, viewed by her with a more swelling satisfaction, and spoken of more to other people with importance as Uncle Joshua. Jane was clever : he saw a likeness to her father, especially to the portrait ; she was not capricious with him, nor wayward, requiring to be coaxed, nor was she fond of sweetmeats, comparatively, and he openly promised her a gold watch next birthday ; till she was fond of him, always kissing him before she went to bed, with such repetitions of that word " Uncle " as were consistent with elegance of language. But he would in private go so far as to swing

Lizzy in the garden swing, and their more secret discourses and talks were known to no one, unless sometimes Mrs. Smythe overheard them, smiling very sweetly. They were all quite domesticated together, and bound closely up in the same lot; so that it was preposterous of the Squire to imagine for an instant that Dr. Smith could be invited without his family. The whole family, of course. Miss Lizzy to be sure. The only question was, as to who should meet them most suitably.

When the full-blown invitation arrived, Dr. Smith himself was in no mind to have accepted it. He did not care about Mrs. Ashburton. It was the inclination of Mrs. Smythe, with the disappointed looks of the girls, that decided him. Besides, Jane made significant remarks about the unlikelihood of old Mayor Singleton being there, or even perhaps the son—knowing, as Mrs. Ashburton did, that there was a coldness between Uncle Joshua and them: his niece also spoke of the second Miss Ashburton in a way that interested him singularly, and he admitted to a wish of judging for himself; nay, he owned to having no particular dislike to music, only no knowledge of it. They all, therefore, came to an agreement, and the invitation was to be formally accepted by the Doctor for the whole of them; in fact, as the reply must be according to etiquette, the invitation a set one, nearly a week beforehand, betokening full-dress and ceremony—all inculcated upon him by Jane—he thought he could not do better than sit down on the spot, at her own new writing-desk, with her own tinted and perfumed note-paper (presents of his, among the rest), and pen the billet to her dictation. He looked up amidst the business, remarking, that “in that case, they would have to drive over, in state?”

“Of course—oh, of course, Uncle Joshua,” replied Jane. Then she went on dictating or amending, while the old gentleman proceeded with his task. Again he looked up.

"Wednesday. Wednesday, half-past 4, P.M."—he said, reflecting. "H'm—let's see—no particular business then, I dare say. Well ; but what day's Chelmsstone Fair—eh ? On the market-day, I believe, *first*—yes—Wednesday. Fair or no fair, however, Master Sol. must attend and drive us. If the weather's good—evening fine, I suppose—we can walk back though."

Jane looked down. "Well ; yes, uncle—I dare say. *If* it is fine," she said, but doubtfully.

"If not, my dear," was the answer, as he wrote on again, "why,—he'll have to come back for us, that's all." So it was arranged very satisfactorily altogether.

The truth was, these changes had brought them well on in the season. Chelmsstone Fair was not only at hand, producing before it a stir in the little town, with preparations on the common hard-by, of skeleton tents and so on ; but the occasion was likely to be more signalized than usual, owing in no small degree, probably, to increased importance of trade and manufacture, prospects and influence, which the enterprising practical views of the Doctor himself were helping on, supported by solid means. Moreover, the time of Chichester Races, not far away, was of course immediately subsequent. The repairs and alterations of the Grange had made rapid progress, so far as they were to go for the present ; so that the house was nearly ready for the fresh change of a united establishment, and at Michaelmas, not a fortnight distant, Solomon's wife from London might well come down to try the cook's place, with very good wages indeed ; leaving the housemaid's charge for Sarah, whose wages also were to rise ; while Solomon's own would most undoubtedly not lose in many ways. The man himself could not but be satisfied. One thing alone stood between him and an easy manner with Sarah. Not that she was likely, as yet, to know who the new cook was. Or, in fact, to have any claim on confession or excuse from Solomon. He had been trying of late to wean himself from her, which

was an honest sign. He had not been so social, of late, next door; the summer season tending to facilitate it, quite naturally, without inducing any marked return to "Blue Pig" habits. There was a constraint about him, and a disagreeableness, if not a purposed air of reserve and mystery. At last, one evening—the Monday evening, to be particular, of the Fair week, two nights before the dinner-party—he *did* come to the back-door in a friendly manner, after his master was done with him; and when treated similarly, though scarce with the same free welcome as before, *did* come half-way in, talking a little. But he did not, to all appearance, like to trust himself in front of the fire, nor think fit to take a stool; and he had something on his mind, that was clear—something to come out with on a sudden, which Sarah at length bade him, plump and plain, to come out with fairly, and be done. Solomon actually started—a most uncommon thing with him—making backward a step or two, till he did bring himself, as it seemed, to unburden. "A—aho—ahem—a—well, Mistress Sarah, no use kicking and higgling about it," he owned. "On my mind it is, as you say. As well out with it and I—I say, Sarah—about that—that *Fifteen Pound*."

Sarah was offended. "I hain't axed for it yet, as I know o'," she said huskily. "But what about it, then. Mister Solomon—if so?"

"I'll have to pay it," said Solomon, somewhat hoarsely too. "I'm going to pay it. It's about ready. Except about ten bob or so, as near as may be, that isn't saved up yet—but I'll have as much in a day or two. After the Fair, d'ye see, there'll be a little change over, out o' pocket money—didn't spend that much last time—militia time—when ye lent it."

"What although," asked Sarah, turning away a little, with a hand working about her kitchen apron, though, to use it, would have been hazardous after a day's work, for her features—"What although, Mr. Sol—limun—the Fair's to be uncommon, I hear, an' a little spendin'

an't neither here nor there for the likes of you, I'm sure?"

Solomon gazed upon her a moment; and there was perhaps a conflict of feelings about his oddly-puckered rather than wrinkled visage, with a real struggle between that vivid eye and the dull one which was so hard to move about. Suddenly he turned to make a bolt outwards, by the scullery door, saying in haste, though with resolution—"Must pay it back, though. Before Michaelmas, too." He hurried out, while Sarah, fixed in her attitude, listened to him going. A little way off, in the dusk that had come by that time, he stopped, as if he had forgot something, and coughed; so that she listened the more intently, nay, moved, as if to close the door. Nothing but a husky kind of loud whisper, coming from the corner, partly guggling in a fond way, more than half drawing in his breath with a sharply-hissing shiver, as if most of all afraid. "Sarah, I say—*Sarah*—Sairey—Sal—Sol—eh? eh? No-no-no—Sarah—Mistress Sarah. *Must* pay it!" He was gone. It could not be but a fancy—a hardening, aggravating fancy—that, like a cold draught of wind afterwards, she heard some hateful mention of legal interest, four-and-a-half per cent., which he ought to pay too—must pay—could be made to pay. She *was*, indeed, indignant; she was angry and embittered to the pitch of resentment, and could have told all to his master. But unless she had been inspired that moment, she knew nothing, poor Sarah, of the rate of legal interest at the time, which *did* turn out to be $4\frac{1}{2}$ per cent.

As the Doctor's chaise, next day, proceeded into Chelmstone, the preparations for the Fair were more than perceptible; they were busy and noisy, crowding and full of stir, to the degree of being incommodious; along that main street and past the market-place, especially, which he had ordered Solomon always now to take, and ever after. All sorts of strangers were about, with not a few ill-looking characters; showing some

considerable excuse for the rumoured precautions of the Hall gamekeeper and his watchers, which had for some days recently been compelled, by unusual aggressions, not to mention Sir Thomas's determined orders. As if the old baronet had not been sufficiently incensed and roused beyond endurance, the growing pertinacity of assault on his preserves and covers had now become audacious, passing from mere single-handed stealth well-nigh to open plunder by organized accomplices. There were suspicions of a regular trade in game, such as no local poacher could alone have put into the hands of town dealers. The defection of the Squire, who before was only lenient, had made matters ten times more infuriating : no cure for it but a thorough one now, to detect the chief offenders, and make examples that would crush them, and expose and destroy the conspiracy. Transportation was the least penalty talked of. Yet there were deeper whispers ; for why was the baronet so quiet himself ?—why was he not heard of this day or two ? Though the pheasants, that autumn, promised to be specially well-conditioned, so many of them as might be left for the legal opening of the season, when Colonel Deane, with a friend or two from the House, was coming down for that object, if for no other more important—and when the closest of all the pheasant copses, the widest, the most abundant and fir-shaded, near the finest brakes and stubbles, once the snuggest and most quiet, close by Chipping Lane, was surely going to be kept intact for the guns of the colonel and his friends—was it true that a scarlet coat and militia musket were to be the most guarded against ?—that Somebody had his eye on some one in particular, and meant to plot and conspire too ?—and might there be some danger of a catastrophe to Dick Cox and Simon Gray, now farming men of the Doctor's own tenant, Farmer Hoby at Poplar Farm ?—or was it all carried on and done by some of these prowling, interloping strangers who mingled with

the throng in Chelmstone, every day more numerous and doubtful?

Such some of Dr. Smith's mental speculations as he was driven along, more slowly than usual. To be driven fast, by that line, at least, was out of the question, let Solomon do as he would. Nay, passing the market-place, and coming round toward the dyery by the waste back-ground near the brew-works, round the canal basin—it was far worse. They had sometimes, positively, to stop altogether; so thick the throng of town's-people, boys, children, work-folks on their way after breakfast, rustics drawn in, canal-men and coal-heavers and brickmakers and bargemen—all attracted to the grand prelude of the Fair, which Mayor Singleton's absurdity had allowed within borough bounds. This was no less than the caravans of the travelling menagerie, ranged with their backs to the water, their fronts toward the market-place, a space within, covered over and made ready for the first wild-beast show. Facing them from various odd nooks, in emulous opposition and still wilder rivalry, were the waxwork van—the Punch and Judy stand—the close caravan of the Two *grand* CURIOSITIES of Modern Times, with a stage before them, on which a tumbling mountebank Merryman performed to a gratuitous audience below, while above were the two vast canvases which displayed the portraits of those curiosities themselves. Dr. Smith put out his head, and stared and wondered with no slight irritation at Mayor Singleton. Solomon sat calmly, slowly, skilfully directing the course of the sleek chestnut mare; not much admiring, evidently, for he was accustomed to better things, and there was a supercilious attitude about the back of his head. At the scent of savage brutes, no doubt, and still more at some occasional growl or snarl, some startling roar or yell, the mare evinced uneasiness and was restive; but they navigated on wonderfully. Seafaring characters there could scarcely be, beside the canal; dramatic per-

formers, play-actors, or stars of any stage whatever, were manifestly remote; poachers and dealers out of season were far likelier.

It was only, indeed, "the celebrated White-haired Giant Lady from Sweden, with the PINK EYES," and the "Learned Wild Man of the Woods," or the only specimen yet brought to Europe, of the Wonderful Performing Hape, or great OOBANG-OUTANG of Asiar." Their mighty effigies looked down to enforce the statement, with an attesting superiority to all wild beasts, which quite eclipsed the prospects of the menagerie as yet; the sky over them not dwarfing down their awful forms, which had a breeze-given movement about them, especially that image of the wild sage, who had the image of a table before him, with cards upon it, a taloned finger upon one, a hairy leg uplifted in repose, a bald grey visage, of uncouth human likeness, which, as it swayed, changed and gibbered visibly.

"Just a going to begin the performance!" shouted the clown in motley, grinning and leering more strangely still. "Walk up, ladies and gemmen—walk up! Walk up! Only sixpence—children 'arf price. Six pence only—till to-morrow doorin' the Fair w'en its *vun bob*, mind yer. Step forward, ladies and ——"

"Drive on, Solomon, can't you!" his master roared, letting down the window-glass, but saw that Solomon was doing his best. They could not get past quicker. Dr. Smith sat back and tolerated it, angrily observing that the old broken-down, painted, piebald and parti-coloured creature on the platform, ceasing to twist his mouth aside and bellow, stared down at himself curiously, inquisitively; cunningly looking off again, away over his head—at the sky, perhaps—and resuming his calls, with a wink and a leer to the crowd, whose laughter was renewed. In fact, gradually drawn to his invitations, a gawky clodpole with his sweetheart rushed up the ladder, followed by a woman with a baby, and a rush of boys, till the success grew speedier and the

clamour tumultuous as the chaise rolled out of it. There was at the door a money-taker, a middle-aged female in an old shawl, which covered some tawdry fancy-costume, though not her tight flesh-coloured stockings and half-burst dancing-pumps,—on the finger with which she kept the shawl about her, a wedding-ring—on her haggard, painted face, the traces of good looks in past years, not perhaps so long ago, but fast getting defaced—her black eye, with which she callously had surveyed the chaise at first, still vivid, but most with vice and temper. Yet *why*—why—as the chaise was just departing, did the callousness all at once vanish under a flash of life and alertness, as she began to take the money? If it were only for the money, why did she stand up at the same time, and, half-carelessly, indeed, glance after them—most of all, why did a queer boy or stunted lad, partly idiotic, it seemed, suddenly come peeping round the back-scene, peering after them and squeaking, if he did not manifest a singular exultation and astonishment? What the deuce had they to do with the chaise, and what was Dr. Smith to them, the vagabonds! As to caring more about them, it was absurd—and whether the couple were respectably married or not; the fact being, however, that the clown had too strong a family likeness to the money-taker, through the paint and harlequinage of both, and the boy too evidently resembled the two of them in the same way—for anything but a blood-relationship. The man was the elder brother—the uncle, of course. Almost provoking that late circumstances made Dr. Smith feel so quick about blood-relationships, uncle-ships, nephew-ships, alleged marriages, et cetera. It annoyed him, when it came to bear upon merry-men, columbines, and imps in the back-ground; and when their faces, with the very faces of the Learned Ourang-Outang and Pink-eyed Lady-with-white hair, were destined to trouble his night's sleep, mingled with the yells of hyænas and the screaming of the Pelican-in-the-wilderness. He only told Solomon,

however, not to drive round that main way for the present, but by the back way again ; which was as if Sol had a secret victory over him. Yet, at home, when he related the thing to Mrs. Smythe, talking it over amidst her quiet remarks, with Jane's contempt, and the amusement of Lizzy—how pleasant it was to find it fade away again and begone !

What was far worse, poor Lizzy had a rather sore throat that night; through being out too late with the hollyhocks and sun-flowers, in the garden, of an autumn evening. Her laughter was rather troublesome to her, and she spoke in a muffled way that would be rather odd, not to speak of the danger, going to the dinner-party at Hinchbrook Manor next afternoon. Unless it got a great deal better. Sore throats were, perhaps, constitutional.

He was very anxious about it, and vexed ; in fact, talked of not going himself, if she was not to go. Next morning, instead of improvement, it was worse. But Lizzy herself insisted on being not minded. Not only had her uncle brought her her fairing, on his early return that day, but Solomon had quietly done so too ; in the shape of the richest gingerbread, and a great parcel of barley-sugar. She was sure, too, she said, to be asked to the next "*Young Party* ;" which would please her better, and perhaps they would come home a little sooner, as the weather was so good and the afternoon fine. Yet doubtless she beheld their departure in full dress with a little disconsolateness, and heard the chaise drive off from the gate, leaving no one else in the house but Sarah,—with a little sigh. A splendid new paint-box, drawing-boards, pencils, brushes, and set of copy-pictures, were for the time her chief consolers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEGINNING OF WHAT WAS UNACCOUNTABLE.

WHEN the party from the Grange had been deposited before the porch of Hinchbrook Manor House, and Solomon was putting up the chaise-step to drive home again, he asked his master, properly enough, but curtly, if he was to come back for them at night. During the forenoon he had been allowed rather scant leisure for the first day of the Fair, but it was still early in the afternoon, and the best of it was yet left; indeed, next day was likely to be best of all.

"I mean to return early," said Dr. Smith in reply to him. "*Before* night. But unless it rains, you need not. No. It looks settled—promises to be a fine evening. Only if it rains, Solomon—or blows. Otherwise, and partly out of consideration, I daresay, to *you*—the ladies are of opinion they can walk back. So make the best use of your time, and—pray, now, my man, no late hours, you understand?"

Solomon made a slight motion of agreement, between touching his hat and nodding; then silently led the mare round, and getting up on the dickey, outside the carriage-sweep, drove rapidly away through the avenue. He was not long in getting to the tavern stable, nor in getting the mare unyoked, unharnessed, rubbed down, and fed; after which he hastened off, as might have been expected, to Chelmstone Fair. Everybody else, almost, was there; and the kitchen-hearth of the "Blue Pig" itself was for the time solitary, ashy, and neglected. Mr. Muggops himself, even Emma, not to speak of young Jim the stable-boy, was, for an hour or so at a turn, absent at the Fair; for it proved in many respects the most frequented, extensive, and lively, as well as uncommon, that had ever yet been held at Chelmstone.

Nevertheless, as the September twilight thickened, and the dusk drew in, the landlord returned from life to business; and very shortly after him, Miss Emma

from pleasure to duty. Nor had either of them any reason to complain: seeing that in the first case there were found not a few steady customers beginning to drop in, with a more than usual irruption of unsteady ones; till the social circle filled up and widened, and became ultimately a most jovial throng around the cheering blaze. As for Miss Muggops, she was enabled to join duty still with a certain pleasure; because in the bar, with Miss Gibbs and her, there lingered awhile the smart young gamekeeper of the Hall, gaily talking, and yet serious amid his pleasantry; after having fallen in with them at the Fair under sunshine, and seen them home by dusk, on account of the bad characters afloat. Emma might not intend falseness to the tall recruiting corporal, now at the wars, and risen to the rank, by last intelligence, of sergeant; but letters from foreign parts were irregular when campaigning had to do with them, and the hazards of a martial life were uncertain; besides, without mentioning his good place at the Hall, Francis Murphy was a well-made, brisk young fellow, with a ready tongue and a black eye, and a swarthy complexion that not only looked genteel, but also had a sort of foreign air. Moreover, much as he had to do at present, being high in the bailiff's good graces—even, it was said at present, in Sir Thomas's confidence—and merely visiting the Fair, or the tavern, with a sharp glance to the business of his charge, under all his agreeableness—for all this, it was a compliment to Emma Muggops that he staid so long inside the bar-closet when he had not a great deal of time to spare, he said, that evening. What was still more, she had reason to see that he often did his best, so far as concerned the "Pig," to keep its frequenters out of scrapes rather than to trap them in; and being by nature a frank out-spoken fellow, with a touch of the Irishman about him, would much rather give Dick Cox a warning or a good advice, than catch him tripping. Both Dick Cox and Simon Gray passed in while he stood there, and the game-

keeper, if he noticed it, would probably have been by no means sorry to have them stay till they went straight home. Nay, little as he had been able to get friendly with Dr. Smith's man, from the Grange, yet Murphy appeared glad at last to observe Solomon coming in with Tom Hubbard and others ; and it was possibly in consequence that he lingered a while longer still, getting always more gay and pleasant, more gallant, complimentary, and manifestly hopeful that the sergeant might be cut out. When he went at length, going towards the kitchen for a glass of ale or so ere he took his leave, Miss Gibbs privately eulogized him more than ever ; for he was a favourite in her eyes, and she had always only done him harm by advocating his cause.

The gamekeeper took the readiest seat he could get, making himself easily at home, till, as he refreshed himself, he bade fair to be the life of the company. Life enough there was, already, and little Solomon—that evening particularly life-like, animated, almost good-humoured and cheerful—had been previously the chief life of it. Which might be the reason that the gaiety of the gamekeeper, as a rival, jarred on his mood ; exciting him only, however, to a sort of trial of wits together, which should make the company liveliest, bandying each others' quips and reports the best, seeming the abler to keep up the ball, without appearing to lose temper. And in this latter, certainly, young Murphy triumphed, not even alluding to matters that had passed, of a delicate kind for Solomon ; while it was as if Solomon was thus the more eclipsed and secretly rubbed against the grain. Till the liquor, of which Murphy did not take much, had its effect on him as he staid longer ; and then Solomon had him at advantage, and doubtless “ragged” the gamekeeper a good deal, with covert hits and touches to provoke him, though he stopped short when the young fellow's dark cheek began to glow, and his eyes to kindle—not daring to hint, of course, at certain suppositions regarding his birth, origin, and coun-

try, which Mr. Muggops would never have allowed at any rate. The landlord brought them round, and it was all in good-humour. The gamekeeper was slower to smooth himself down than Solomon; who showed much good-temper, setting himself to make up for a little cantankerousness, in fact growing to be friendly. So that while Murphy relaxed, and Solomon would have settled all by volunteering to join him in a hunting-song, with chorus, they might have stayed later in the evening without excess upon the gamekeeper's time. When he looked at the clock it was early for a Fair night in autumn—not beyond half-past eight; nor dark enough, with that starlight outside, for poachers, and free from cover of wind or rain. If Simon Gray had not risen, saying he must get to bed early, because of a barley-stack to thresh next morning before Fair time, and better not wait to get a-singing—then Dick Cox, quite ready to sing, being a little in liquor, would most likely not have sworn he must see him safe home, and risen too.

"Faith, then, if that's the case," said the gamekeeper, laughing as he looked for his hat and a bag beside it, "I must be stepping as well."

Cox and Gray, for all that turned out, might have been quite well-intentioned; and as to this occasion, very likely were. However, when the gamekeeper promptly paid for his ale, and went out, they *did* fumble and delay with Sukey about their score, what they had had, and what not, what was to be chalked or what settled; as if really to linger behind after all. At last they got away, when Cox could have been heard trying at the tune still, if he had gone a mile. The next man that went away was Solomon.

As Solomon passed out of the front wicket, Francis Murphy came out from the bar place, to follow quietly in sight of Cox and Gray: and when he came up to Solomon, he stood for a moment or two, at sight of the fellows. "I think they're all right," he was heard to

say; "but we'll see." To which Solomon—who was standing in a leisurely way, before he went home, doubtless—cackled jocosely also, saying nothing for any one to recollect in particular, save that it was friendly enough still. It was not he, but the gamekeeper, who seemed to propose stepping along together by the church, as if for a view of them, if they inclined to go by the lane; at all events, in that direction they disappeared together. The next testimony to what occurred, being that of Simon Gray afterwards, bore a prejudicial character, perhaps; but as the very last evidence on the subject, it became valuable.

At the corner, where Chipping Lane turns up from the common cart road round to Poplar Farm and the river ground, the gamekeeper and the Doctor's man came up with Cox and Gray, who from natural reasons were both hesitating. "Come, now, Gray," said the first, rather more angrily than usual, like a man in a passion, "*you're not shamming beery, at any rate—so I'd advise ye, mind go home. Keep out o' that — lane for to-night, anyhow,*" he had used an oath, "*for I tell ye it's the worst night ye could take it! It's tempting to ye, I dare say, but by the powers!*" another oath, this was, "*there's one on the watch, d'ye see, this time, that I can't answer for!*" "So none o' your short cuts, me man," said he, "*till this hanged Fair's over, d'ye hear?*" Still that last oath. And Gray, according to his account, was induced by bodily fear of Francis Murphy to agree that he would go the half mile round, if it was to be so; and dragged off Cox, who by that time could scarce walk at all. Finally, Gray swore that he did not know whether the gamekeeper parted then from the other man or not, though they appeared too friendly to do so in a hurry. A hurry, however, the gamekeeper was in, for he was afterwards seen by somebody else hurrying from the bailiff's house, on the Chelmsstone Road; having parted from the Doctor's

servant, as he said, there and then. Solomon apparently meaning to go home, from the statement of the sexton's whole family, who saw him pass the churchyard gate.

On the other hand, the dinner party at Hinchbrook Manor had gone off so well, passing the time so pleasantly and rapidly, that the Doctor almost forgot Lizzy's cold; until the coffee was brought into the modernized old withdrawing-room, near the fine old library with the organ in it, where Mrs. Ashburton had played for his behoof; while the Squire, often beating time, sang his harmony to it, with his two elder daughters, sometimes joined by a little old gentleman from Canterbury, in a strange scratch-wig, who poorly filled the place, however, of Nugent. Then the Doctor, pulling out his watch, declared, without politely consulting Mrs. Smythe at all, that they had stayed too long already; and early though Mrs. Ashburton might think it, not knowing the circumstances—they must go. At least *he* must. Nevertheless the lady's smile was full of suavity; and when Mrs. Smythe explained, as to the real seriousness of sore throats in Elizabeth's case, with the dulness of being left alone in the house besides, Mrs. Ashburton quite entered into the excuse—nay, felt that there was the greater kindness in their not letting it stand in the way of the visit. Many pleasant opportunities, she hoped, they would have of enjoying similar occasions at greater length—along, too, with Miss Elizabeth herself; who “was a favourite of her own.”

They left behind them, as they departed, a really suitable, and, on the whole, pleasant party, most of whom still remained behind to close the evening in cultivated discourse. Mr. and Mrs. Ashburton had invited Mrs. Deputy Webb and the Curate as a matter of course; but besides them, in addition to Captain Norris and the musical Canterbury gentleman, who was organist to the cathedral, on a visit near—there were no less than three elderly men of science; one of them medical, though

retired upon an annuity ; another, an obscure but ardent entomologist ; the third, a legal gentleman whose passion was for natural history in a different branch, at the same time being a district coroner of the county. Such the *conversazione*, at which Dr. Smith had appeared to less advantage than at the dinner itself ; where not only must the servants have attributed any slips of usage in his part to the superiority of wealth, but when he had treated the foot-boy as a sort of waiter, and once familiarly called the table-maid, at random, " Mary," when he had directly contradicted the medical man, and eventually drank his host's health before any other healths were wished—it had been all evidently attributed to his being a capitalist and heavy fund-holder : so also, when he astonished the respectable old factotum butler, after the ladies had retired, by direct praise of the old wine as *good*.

One settled point was, that in the course of the evening, Mr. Webb, the Curate, had vastly grown in the Doctor's esteem. Nor had there been a want of lighter amenities, as he agreed while they talked of it on their way down the avenue. Then—as to the two daughters who were there—oh, of course, of course, after having his attention so prepared by Jane—in fact, by other knowledge beforehand—he had certainly tried, amidst the talk and all that, to know which was which. Well, he had a sort of confusion up to that moment about their names, or which *was* the second daughter—as Jane had made a mystery of it—but was he to say which was *his* favourite ? " Then it was the oldest-looking of the two—the tallest—the quietest—the staidest and gravest and least dressy. As to eyes—hair—why, really, that is a poser—amber-coloured muslin, pooh ! "

" Voice—fine voice ? Not the prettiest, but the likeliest to be a beauty, yet ? "

" How on earth can a plain common-sense man recollect such niceties ? I don't pretend to understand 'em—
ne—'twas the one that could answer sensibly when ye

spoke to her, then, Miss Jane—the one that could say something else, my dear, than, ‘Yes, sir!’ or ‘No, sir!’ and ‘La! I declare! Vastly so! Have you seen the performances at so-and-so, Dr. Smith?’—and ‘’Tis said town was very gay this season—and the new opera by Gretry is understood to be excessively pretty!’ Now, which is that, Madam Jane?”

“La, uncle!” laughed Jane, who had hold of one arm as they walked, while Mrs. Smythe benefited by the other, “how severe you are! I declare I had no notion you were so observing—such a mimic.”

“Besides,” pursued the Doctor, “she appeared disposed to carry on our conversation when I began it—and once or twice, after she was called to the singing—when, by the way, miss, her name turned out to be Margaret, at all events—I could see her glance over at me sideways, in a half-compassionate, half-funny style, as that old fellow, the beetle-collector, pounced upon me. The rest of them were poking about the book-cases, taking out books, peering into ‘em with spectacles—the rudest set of boors couldn’t have been duller to that tune, too! Why, it was one I knew, myself—positively an old air, sister-in-law, that I recollect from school-days, James’s and mine, when we went along the street where there were ballad-singers, and I could take his part against the big boys! I somehow fancy I had named it to the girl.”

“She is the second of the Miss Ashburtons,” said Mrs. Smythe, elucidating matters; “there is something really most engaging about Miss Margaret—though she seems reserved. She sings beautifully, and sung the air of that song, I thought, with particular feeling.”

“There was something in the song, I know,” said the Doctor, “like listening to a blessed brook long ago, in summer, deep down among the old trees—the old grass—the very stones, Mrs. Smythe. How it could have been *she* that sung it, evidently noticing that beetle-man as she did, I can’t conceive—but, at any rate she rescued

me as soon as it was done. The man was explaining to me—good gracious! all about the invariability of procedure, as he called it, in the whole *coleopterous* family, with their food and instincts—the beetle species, that's to say—which threatened to bring the Coroner down upon us both, with his book, forsooth! It refreshed one, I can tell you, to have a few more words with the young lady. Nugent and she, I found, had been acquainted. I like that Margaret—she's my favourite of them."

"Margaret is understood," said Jane, carelessly, "to be engaged, in a kind of way, to Lieutenant Singleton."

The young lieutenant, indeed, had been of those who joined the party in the withdrawing-room, where "young Evans," also, and another boarder of the Curate's, had appeared to tea. The Doctor made a sound of suppressed whistling.

"Oh—oh!" he said. "Well, she didn't appear extraordinarily glad to see him, then. That's all. And now I think of it—ha! ha! I must have been rude in an allusion I half-made when in the corner—about an absurd-looking puppy, to come forward interrupting us. And, to judge by her putting up her fan and not being able to speak, why, I should say, Jane, she was most inclined to——"

"What noise is that?" exclaimed Jane, interrupting him, with a pull of his arm. "Good heavens! what terrible sounds—listen!"

They all stopped, and stood still to listen accordingly; but Dr. Smith only laughed, recognizing at once the causes of alarm, in which Mrs. Smythe had participated. Over the Hall woods, to that open point of the road, with a momentary distinctness assisted by the slight breeze, came evidence of the noisy state of things in Chelmsstone; a blended medley of discordant sounds, from drumming and shouting to clashing or blowing of some rude horn, out of which rose, more than once, a strange, shrill scream or yell, or harsh and savage bray or roar, but was stifled in again, and overpowered in clamorous

confusion : while, as the air fluctuated among the leaves and a few steps brought the village eminence between, it was all lost in more familiar rural noises—the lowing of cattle, the bark of farm-mastiffs, the rumble of carts on their way homeward, the trotting of some brisk horse upon the nearest road. ¶

“ If the pelican of the wilderness *did* escape,” said the old gentleman, stoutly, with a vigorous thump of his walking-staff on the ground, “ it would be more terrified, I fancy, than we should ! So would the tameless zebra, no doubt, or the hyena of Abyssinia—and as to the lion with the man in its mouth, which was on the canvas, I shrewdly suspect he had no other existence.”

As they proceeded, however, both his companions eyed every dark clump of trees with mistrust.

“ But think, uncle,” murmured the niece, with a dismayed pressure towards him, “ think of that—that dreadful lady with the—the peculiar hair. Or of the—the what’s-his-name ! ”

“ Stuff—I don’t want to think of ’em, child,” answered her uncle, stamping onward. “ The pink-eyed lady, I trust, is quite satisfied with her treatment—under legal engagement to exhibit, I hope—and if so, could be committed as a vagabond, in case of attempting to go at large. She couldn’t exist in society—couldn’t be tolerated in it for a moment, my dear—so we’ll change the subject.”

“ Surely,” suggested Mrs. Smythe, mildly, “ it is improper in the authorities to allow such persons—these things, I mean, in country places. Unless, to be sure, they are securely enclosed ? ”

“ They’re all within bars, I assure you, sister Mary,’ was the comforting reply. “ Strong cages, in heavy vans—I saw ’em. But I agree with you—it’s a nuisance—they’ve no right to be here—and incompetent as old Singleton is, I’ll see him about it, to-morrow. He’s not inclined, I can tell you, to stand out against *me*, when I get in earnest with him—and he ain’t such an unmanage-

able being after all, only pig-headed. It's half-stupidity, I dare say, that meanness of his.—My dear madam, believe me the worst we've to contend with hereabouts is human stupidity. Hark ! There, now—what's that ? A shot.—Another ! These poachers, again," observed Dr. Smith, with vehemence : at the same stopping short between the two ladies, to hear if any more should follow. The sounds had come abruptly, in quick succession, from the Hall woods themselves ; just before the party would have entered the deep Grange lane, among enveloping hedge-row foliage : and there the Doctor paused in doubtful expectation. No further report reached the spot, however. A kind of stillness ensued, which was in great part imaginary : since the noises abroad that night were sufficient to have masked a more unusual disturbance, even without the rustling of boughs, the fluttering air, or the flowing of water by bridge and mill-dam, distant hootings of owls, village voices, the very striking of the village clock. The village clock, in the church-tower, struck ten before they moved ; and Dr. Smith, taking out his watch, had been trying to see what the time was. It was an obscure night, however fine ; the late-rising moon, as she waded up behind a fleecy cover, only oozed out at times ; serving to show the nearest slates in the village, where the dew made them glisten. Then all was a dusky fit, with the starlight opposite.

" Really, considering the impudence of these poachers," said he, hurrying them on homeward, " one can hardly wonder at the old baronet, wrong-headed as he may be. The having property makes people careful of it, no doubt—and if Poplar Farm had copses or coverts on it, perhaps I should feel annoyed myself—neither do I altogether approve of the Squire's easiness on the matter. Poaching, ma'am, is next door to what's bad, and if there was silver-plate in the house, why, I'd feel none the easier just now. What with that music, and our talking, we're later than we promised. Lizzy must be wearying ! "

She was not gone to bed, however, as Jane thought

likely. She was waiting up, and greatly interested in the party when they hurried in. As Solomon had not returned yet, the night being too undeniably fine to have required it—Dr. Smith entered along with them ; spending at least an hour in the agreeable chat, which was then so merry, about the pink-eyed giant lady with white hair, from Sweden—so confident that if poaching were ever proper, it would be in case the escaped pelican of the wilderness had been shot.

Still, after Lizzy went to bed, Solomon made no appearance ; ashamed, doubtless, when for once betrayed into keeping late hours, to come farther than Muggops's. It turned out he had the door-key of the end wing, however ; and the partition being as yet more than made-up for by a gap under repair, the Doctor was for the first time excluded from his detached abode. He was obliged, for the first time, to take a spare bed at Mrs. Smythe's ; an accident which, as things happened, became merely the conclusive step to make a final change.

Next morning, at Muggops's, Solomon was not to be found ; only heard of, as on his way home at nine, the night before. He had evidently, as was plain to his master at that stage, absconded. That it was a final absconding when once carried so far, Dr. Smith was equally convinced.

Yet, when Sarah's account of her last interview with him was given, as of course it was, including the decided purpose of his own accord to repay her money—then Dr. Smith became influenced by some obvious doubts of the conclusion. The borrowing money from Sarah was in itself curious, though yet accountable-for, as involving his militia-substitute, the man Cox. And without calling Sarah further in question, or Cox either—without entering, indeed, on unnecessary explanations with Sarah, as regarded the new cook in prospect, who had hitherto been a confidential topic with Mrs. Smythe alone—the Doctor at once made the natural search among Solomon's effects, in the little garret room he had occupied, The man's

box of clothes was there, containing things he would naturally have taken, if bent on departure ; all in characteristic disorder, with many miscellaneous sundries, odds-and-ends, and ingenious contrivances, nor without signs of his handiwork at repair or tailoring. In the drawer of an old table, a letter to his wife, nearly finished, about coming down safe enough by herself, after Michaelmas Day. In the till of the box, a heavy parcel of money ; being no other than the loan of Sarah, tied in a piece of leather, and roughly marked outside as such—"Sarah's money—£14 8s. 5d." The guineas were the same new, bright, full ones which he had received, as she could testify when they were restored to her ; the odd change showing how little he had spent.

Otherwise, Dr. Smith said nothing more to indicate doubt of the supposed elopement. Why Solomon should resort to elopement when he might have openly taken leave, was unintelligible. That he had not really intended, nay wished, to stay—was more than perplexing to believe, under the circumstances. At all events, it was not foul play that had been done to him for money's sake about the Fair—as had been the first new idea with his master ; neither had the fellow required money for any secret demands on him, such as sending it to his wife. On the whole, to be well rid of him by his own act was about the most comfortable issue, after all. So Dr. Smith contented himself with saying so to his sister-in-law, and writing a letter to the wife, for whom he promised all due compensation.

CHAPTER XIX.

SOMETHING PRÆTERNATURALLY SIGNIFICANT.—OF
WHAT ?—TO WHOM ?

A COMPARATIVE calm ensued in the whole neighbourhood, after the Fair was thoroughly over : after the vagabonds and loose characters had once more dispersed, and such of

the obnoxious caravans or unlicensed shows as evinced any disposition to linger, had been quickened in their departure; through the efforts of Dr. Smith, backed by the Squire, and now at last taken up by Mayor Singleton, who displayed on the whole a very proper feeling. Vague suspicions had not failed to lodge upon the Punch and Judy people, the wild-beast exhibitors, and the proprietors, above all, of the travelling curiosities; who, one and all—though neither poaching, stealing, nor robbery or foul-play of any kind could be brought home to them—were dismissed with a caution, as well as the hint that they had better take care wherever they went, to Chichester Races or to Notley, south or east, northward or westward. It was a fact, not without its inference, that the poaching and the petty offences had then ceased; nor only so, but, with the removal of peep-shows and menagerie, learned wild man, and pink-eyed lady, a weight seemed to have been lifted off people's minds; while the departure of the Doctor's serving-man was by no means amongst the least causes conducing to relief. On the head of Solomon was then visited, perhaps, a good deal which he had been innocent of; only with two or three was it considered disagreeable to hear him made worse than he was, to lift up their heels when his back was turned, and after giving-in to him, almost in some cases fawning upon him, to say that he was no good, and the best they wished him was to die in his shoes, but never show face again near Hinchbridge. For still, even to his late master, who felt the disencumbrance more satisfactory every day, would it have been pleasant to hear something in proof that Sol had not been ungrateful, that all the pains had not been thrown away upon him, and that the man might end his days decently yet. Little things came up about him, especially in the Grange, that were favourable; Lizzy was sorry he was gone; so was the fat chestnut mare, to judge from some signs to Muggops; and when the first letter from Nugent came, written at sea for a ship that was in sight, homeward-bound—he

asked among other things, how "*old Sol*" was getting along. Nevertheless, the unaccountable disappearance had its part in bringing things together at the village; seeing that Bailiff-Sloane did not make himself so unpleasant, Dick Cox appeared to have taken it to heart, so as to improve, and do his share in steadying Simon Gray, as good wages were now going at the farm. As to Sir Thomas Deane himself, he had grown wonderfully tolerant of the Doctor's doings, great though they were; when Chipping Lane was fairly opened, he said nothing, nor did the commencement of the new school-house bring him out—with the setting-up of the village post-office, the display of conspicuous improvements at the Grange, the preparations to make an addition to the "*Blue Pig*," and the very road that was laid out from Poplar Farm, direct into the disputed lane. This apparent mildness went the length of impressing the Doctor with a supposition of the old baronet's coming round to the neighbourly feeling, and being in a mood to return the first advances, if *he* only made them. So he sent up a note to the Hall before long—in unison with the Squire's private agreement, as well as old Singleton's ready support—to say he would be most happy to concert measures with Sir Thomas for the entire suppression of game-offences in the district; mentioning at the same time who would join with him, and very respectfully craving the honour of being allowed to explain in person.

His messenger came back, however, with the chill, verbal reply, that "there was no answer." Sir Thomas, though not aggressive, was fiercely sullen. He was insultingly contemptuous. The Colonel and friends were with him; the Hall was full of company, fashion, importance, and dinner-parties; the shootings open, the gamekeeper and helpers astir for sport, as if all the game were to be shot down that season. And what with coursing-days, riding to the harriers, expectation of the fox hunting time itself—all the Deanes and the Hall-folks were probably too proud at present to think of the Doctor

or the Squire either. So they were not a little stirred on to independent action ; while the Mayor was likely, if his choice must be made, to stick by Mr. Ashburton, whose family were intimate with his son. He had recently been huffed, besides, when Mrs. Mayor Singleton at last called to invite Lady Deane and the baronet to their grandest dinner, wishing any day to be fixed that suited them—and Lady Deane, after all that had been done and risked in their cause, took out a notebook, saying really at present it was impossible to find a day disengaged.

But all this was nothing—absolutely nothing—to a growing trouble by which all Hinchbridge and the neighbourhood had begun to be disturbed, as the autumn advanced, and the long, dark, windy nights came on. It was as if the Hall and its interests were going to be avenged without further exertion, for that admission of strangers to settle, and that defection to the side of interloping new-comers, for the victory gained in Chipping Lane, for the usurping of the old Cloynes' place, or the bringing up of their names again, and the innovations, and the changes, and the social and political conspiracies and projects. Chipping Lane, though thrown open, threatened to become useless ; Poplar Farm, though transferred, bade ill for easy access or profit ; the Grange, however enlarged or repaired, wore to everybody each day the gaunter look for winter nights that were coming, if it was not yet positively revisited or scared. Above all, the frequenters of Muggops's, in the very midst of their crowing and increasing sociality, were in a bad way for keeping it up with comfort, if the said alarm lasted and went on : for soon no road would be safe in the twilight, and the shortest by-path, cross-cut, or even village alley, was already fearful after dark. A stranger was about, of the most mysterious kind ; an interloper far worse than suspicious ; an unearthly meddler, neighbour, or inhabitant. And although dim at first, confined to a few testimonies, heard of here and there,

with regard to certain places—yet the uneasy fact grew settled and distinctly appalling, that from some still-secret spot or other, by what being or for what end unknown—Hinchbridge was haunted.

All Hinchbridge, all the parish and its outskirts, along to Chelmstone, past the Grange, down to Hinchbrook, up Chipping Lane, round about the park, the woods, the Hall—was at the commencement indefinitely and indescribably haunted. Nobody was dead of late, nobody worth thinking of had died for many a day; and it was not indeed a rustic joke, or a local bugbear got up for a purpose, which could so completely save the gamekeeper trouble now; making trespass a thing unthought-of, keeping intrusion from the precincts of the Hall, closing Chipping Lane without a wall, and sending home Cox and Gray together at early hours, by the most undoubted roads possible, by the least suspicious circuits. The truth was, one would have thought the gamekeeper disliked the change; he would not have been sorry, it seemed, to fall in with Cox then; it was understood he gave Cox the offer of "helper's" post, but Dick declined it at any price. It was to Bailiff Sloane, at the outset, that the rumour appeared most welcome; he encouraged and propagated it for the first few days by all means in his power, every nod or wink, or solemn shake of the head, as much as to say he could testify to the truth of it.

Now, it was the more singular, that Bailiff Sloane all of a sudden changed his tune, and showed firmer belief by denying the thing, by getting angry about it, advising and reasoning against it as an absurd notion—which folks had better not assert or set a-going: for this was involuntarily contradicted by a vague expression about his own face the while, as if he began to be scared, and might take the alarm himself. Somehow, every morning and every night, the terror was become more defined, pointing from within narrower circles to something more like an object that by certain individuals had

been dreaded, felt, heard, seen—until it might soon utter meaning, and come forth into the very daylight, and speak the plainest horrors, following the huddled people, if it were into the church on Sunday. *Where* it had been most seen—became quickly public. Chipping Lane was the main source and centre of the spectral manifestation, that sent belated passers breathless up or down, till the mere twilight did the same ; yet it ranged round the other side, by Chelmsstone, where passengers on the common road had fared likewise, near the lodge-gate, even within sight of the “Deane Arms.” So that it differed not, to avoid the lane, or have it shut up ; since people must just as certainly give up passing through the grounds by the approaches, or skirting the park wall in any way ; a thing equal to cutting off the market town altogether. Then, in other directions it might soon be the same, if all accounts were true.

Part of it, doubtless, was a blind panic of infection. When Dr. Smith and the Squire took up the matter, wishing very much that Sir Thomas would assist, their measures had a distinct effect. Bold example, with some trouble to prove that the supposed impostors avoided their direction, at all events helped to narrow the ground, and decide where the region of the influence lay, though it only became the more manifest as no imposture. There was a staggering evidence of this in the state of things at Sir Thomas’s own house, the Hall of Hinchbridge. Not only did Sir Thomas show no bold example, nor use the least pains to detect imposition ; but his own servants were the stoutest witnesses, or the most cravenly silent corroborators, by their conduct. *It* had been visibly perceived, audibly encountered, almost palpably suffered from, by more than one terrified member of the establishment, low or high, menial or visitor ; and they were all hastening to shorten their stay, or end their visit, to look out for places or give warning ; none the less, of course, in that the old baronet betrayed the deepest dread of all, when his conduct was so

strangely timorous while sober, or when heated with wine so eccentrically wild or intolerably unpleasant; when all night the long old picture gallery with the family portraits, was kept lighted up, and the staircase too, while Sir Thomas paced about, or stamped, or had scaring dreams. He was beginning to drink to excess as his guests left him, affecting suavity, though he scorned it; nor did old Lady Deane show greater fortitude by her manner. Only, when their own daughters became eager to leave for town, or go over to the place in Kent, and were finally departed—Sir Thomas obstinately refusing, for all his uneasiness, to go away—then Lady Deane declined, it was said, to leave him alone; showing a care she had scarce exhibited before, and tending him with an affectionate solicitude. He was in a fair way, indeed, unless nicely tended, to empty the old cellar of its port wine, except a stroke of apoplexy stopped him; for his sporting habits were gone, the Colonel and his friends gone, the shooting prematurely ended. Lady Deane drove out the oftener, as he would at least sit with her in the carriage, if she were there, and he did not object, by broad daylight, to the carriage-roads or highways.

In Francis Murphy, the young Hall gamekeeper, there was a testimony, ever increasing its force, to render the baronet excusable. Murphy was not a fellow to look afraid, nor did he do so. He came no less frequently to the tavern, at his usual hours, not a whit altering them, nor changing his roads, for all that was said, when bound on a visit to Miss Emma, whose favour he courted as gallantly, if not so gaily, as before. Moody a little, she thought him, and dull by fits; yet what young woman would not have thought more of his manhood for staying so long as he did, in spite of dusk or dark, breeze or shower? He drank a little more at the kitchen fire, perhaps: but Murphy's conduct might have done much to re-assure the customers, the neighbourhood in general, and possibly the baronet, his master, if he had only con-

tinued to brave it out, and say nothing. His lips were pretty well set on the subject till one night, when the deaf silent man hinted that, by his gravity, he must have seen or heard the thing himself. But when the idea was touched upon, Murphy flamed up, clenching his fist in a passion at the man.

"No more o' that, George," said he, smoothing down at last, and drinking to him. "I don't show any fear, I think, old lad? Why, over and over, by night and day, I've tracked the place with a good conscience—and all I've to say is, if I find anyone else but myself near that pheasant-cover, I'll know the reason of it. Hey, Dick, my boy?"

Dick Cox only drew back. The deaf man put his hand to his ear, leaning forward. "What—what place, d'ye say?" asked he. "I didn't say nowt on a place—nof a any one else, neither. 'Twere a thing. The *thing*, mun."

"Come, come," interposed Mr. Muggops, fidgeting, "no more on't—it an't pleasant, George."

There was a dead silence, after which the cobbler whispered that "he'd like, though, to have a notion *whose* it was."

The gamekeeper had risen, taken his bag and gun, and rather discomposedly bidden good night, stepping out, with a word or two to Miss Emma, then whistling, passed upon his way, through the rainy October twilight.

Next day there was the strangest rumour of all. The gamekeeper, on his way home that very night, on the Chelmstone road, near his own cottage, had confessedly, by his own admission to Bailiff Sloane, met something, fallen in with or seen something, that had changed his tone in the completest way. He, too, was throwing up his place in consequence, and would brave it out no more. It was no use his trying, he said to the Bailiff, in a determined manner. "It was no use arguing. No—it was no matter what Sir Thomas might have to say on the

subject—Sir Thomas had nothing to do with his reasons, nor Mr. Sloane either. They were private, and he meant to keep them so.” He threw up his place accordingly, delivering over his gun, bags, and other articles belonging to the charge, saying, that till a new keeper was got, the cover and copses were safe enough, in his opinion, as there was a sufficient keeper already. Then he walked straight home to his cottage, intending to leave that very afternoon for another part of the country; but took to his bed for a day or two instead, and was said to be very ill indeed.

As Dr. Smith was on his way to the man’s house, on the Chelmsstone road, however, roused beyond patience by what he considered superstitious nonsense and delusion, half drunken credulity, half rustic fancy—he saw Francis Murphy himself come out of the “Blue Pig,” in different clothes from ordinary, with a walking-stick and a parcel, looking pale and shaken. He had come along to see Muggops, to say he had meant honourably by his daughter, but perhaps it was as well to part friends, and no more; he was obliged to bid good-bye, at any rate, and as for Sergeant Tompkins, he was a likelier man, no doubt, with better prospects, who might do her more justice and have a pension when he came home, though he *were* a little up in years by that time. At that, the landlord had been rather short with him, taking his offered hand in an uncommonly slack hold, and dropping it as if it were too hot or too cold, with some remark about Emma having foolish notions, may be, as to shaking hands with folks who had seen aught above common. At all events, she had been too proud to look out of the closed bar-window; so the young fellow came fast along, everybody keeping in-doors to peep after him, when he turned the green to take the Notley road for Kent. The Doctor hastened his pace in the same direction, overtaking him as they were clear of the village, when they had a brief conversation. The ex-game-keeper was perfectly respectful, recognizing the old

gentleman sooner than the latter had done him; for they had never talked together before.

"It was quite true," he replied, hastily; "no exaggeration about it. No trick or deception, either. What he had met in the dusk, on the Chelmstone road, was nothing earthly. That he could swear to, and swear he would not face it again for any man, as he *had* done till it was past." There was no need to ask again if he was serious, in earnest; the eye and the tone proved that.

"But what—*what*, my good man, for the sake of goodness—for any sake—for the sake of common charity to the place—that people mayn't go distracted with it—what *is* this—this horrible thing?" So ejaculated the troubled Doctor. "What is it like, man?—how are we to—put it down, I say?"

Murphy looked anxiously to him, then looked away, shaking his head. "No, sir—no," he answered, most solemnly; "I can't assist you—I daren't say more. As long as I breathe, in fact, I won't, if possible. I'd advise you, sir, not to stir it—it'll go down of itself, I warrant me—all I can say is, I've a clear conscience, if it was at the Day of Judgment, and if anybody ever wants me, I'm going right to Canterbury, where I've friends, and can get a place about the Cathedral. 'Tis No. 20, Grove Street. I'll be to be found there, if ye'll believe me, sir, till further notice."

There was really something about the young man's appearance, expression, and manners, out of his game-keeper's suit, which greatly interested the old Doctor, exciting his sympathy in the case. He asked Murphy, if he had not yet got a place, whether he would not rather stay and take one at the Grange; to drive a chaise, attend to a horse, and do the general duties of a groom and confidential servant; unless he preferred something more in the way of a clerk or managing overseer. The truth was, Murphy's personal appearance had now so superior an air, the paleness conducing to it, that Dr. Smith had somewhat hesitated to propose an

ordinary servant's place. As it was, a slight flush rose to the young man's cheek, though he in turn considered for a moment or two. "On the whole, sir—well—no—I don't like the part of the country," he said. "It's better, the way I've fixed. One thing, sir, I'd like to say—as you're like to have a good deal of influence about, Dr. Smith, it's my notion that pheasants don't suit the preserves, here—they're a bad bird, somehow—eat a deal of grain and young crop. Besides, the thoroughfares disturb 'em, sir,—and if they are to be, why, suppose you come to be friendly any time, yourself, with Sir Thomas—I'd say they might be shifted next season nearer Oakstead. Beg pardon," he added, "for saying so much—but it's experience, sir—it's a kind of an advice, so to speak. For no keeper will stay unless." Saying which, the young man touched his hat to resume his journey, and Dr. Smith had to bid him a reluctant good-day.

To struggle against this description of thing was useless. Inspection or not, Dr. Smith himself felt nervously uneasy at the spread of it; and as he walked home under broad daylight, speculated seriously within his own mind, whether such things could really be. He echoed Hamlet without knowing it. For what end, too—with what mysterious cause? No escaped creature of the desert, or dissatisfied pink-eyed lady, would have for a moment approached this, in deep, undefinable, increasing consternation. His only resource was to say nothing of it at home, and if possible, as it was no laughing matter, exclude the dire epidemic or inexplicable visitation from the Grange.

CHAPTER XX.

A SPECTRAL REVELATION.

YET the gamekeeper was not to be the last of it. In rapid sequence, as well by day as by night, the steps of

the nameless existence that terrified Hinchbridge were growing distincter, coming nearer, sounding plainer towards some glaring issue against the very sun.

In the daytime, one day of flickering sunshine and breezy shadow, when the clouds and the leaves were blowing away, though the faded woods were tinted and kindled with many a gorgeous hue—a man was coming down Chipping Lane, from forenoon work, and in the fitful rustlings past him, after him, he was scared beyond himself by a sound and a sight which people had reported of before, though not so clearly. It was as if a restless thing that dwelt in the lane had at length swept on in chase of him, amidst the patter of flying leaves; and rushing by with the flicker of a sunbeam or the shadow of a cloud, rose through the air, floated out under the branches, and bounding downward from point to point, grew still again in an ambush of leaves and rank withering weeds. Between him and the village it rested silently, waiting, as it were, to come forth and speak. He was a hard-handed, sturdy, middle-aged man, quite sober and awake. But there came a terror over him that was irresistible, and he hastily took a long round by the fields to get home for dinner; in order that, if awful matters were to be made known, or rest brought to Hinchbridge, he might not be the means selected. He had been one of those who, last Christmas time, had helped to roll the great snowball down that very lane; before it had in the same manner bounded away from them, and taken to rolling of itself through the pales, out upon the green. Nevertheless, he told it most decidedly, and when half the village came together boldly, to charge up the lane and encounter it, he stoutly joined the party.

As for the search itself, it proved unavailing; but they had not long come back again, and dispersed, when every one rushed amain to the open green, where, not far from the churchyard gate, a boy had found what was in itself strange enough. A hat—a man's hat—quiet at the time,

though restless it must have been, and might that day have rolled far. It was not, by the declaration of the person lately scared, the thing that had scared him—not the least like it: but to any view it was sufficiently scaring, for the hat was not such as ever had been worn in Hinchbridge—being of a strange fashion and hue, grey and ancient rather by its make than by age or wear; with but little mark or stain on it, long as it must have lain in all weathers—possibly longer than was suspected. There were old tales of the lane, going back to the Cloynes' time, and the present baronet's grandfather. Was anything going to be discovered now, as to that dark period? The constable, at all events, took it in charge to lock up till the proper authorities could see it; and meanwhile the constable,—a sturdier, steadier, stouter man than most in the place, when put to it,—volunteered to lose an afternoon's work at the forge that very day, and search the lane from top to bottom while the light lasted; if only hands enough would go with him to use spade and mattock to purpose, that the trouble might be laid to rest and done with. He believed more devoutly, perhaps, than any other, that it must be so managed, so it was the more courageous of him; and when the old parish-clerk told of the old suspected spot, it needed nothing further than men to do it. The readiest of these was Simon Gray, from the farm; a stubborn fellow, not easy to daunt, and if he were primed with liquor, might not have minded the corses at night itself, but for the hanging back of Dick Cox. This time, too, Cox hung back, bargaining to stop any such work before the dusk. He knew quietly besides, that the place was so close to Poplar Farm, as to require no coming back by dark if they broke the bargain; when, unless Gray were such a fool as to see the constable back, the constable must return to the village alone. So the three of them went off resolutely in broad sunshine, to search the lane and dig at the crossing; followed by a few, who only retreated when the sun began to set.

Now, in the lane they discovered nothing for all their pains; and after some hours' work beside the old drain, at the crossing, where the legend directed them, they had found nothing as yet but stones and water. It was dusk already. In fact, it was getting dark, but that night was to be full moon, and would be the broadest moonlight; so the constable, not at all afraid, gathering a professional enthusiasm as he proceeded, was determined to dig on, though he should be left to dig alone, till he should reach the till, and be sure there were no bones. Bones somewhere, he was sure there were—and that was the only spot that showed signs of them. Therefore Simon Gray, steadied the more by his courage, swore not to leave him till the end; telling Dick he might go and welcome. By that time it was too dusk for Dick to like crossing the fields; and he was glad,—as they could not work well till it was moonlight,—when they agreed with him to refresh a bit at the farm, if he, like a man, came back with them. The dark had produced no cause of fright, and, primed at Poplar Farm by the ale they got, Dick honourably returned in the broad moonlight. Then almost as soon as they fell to work again, the constable's pick-axe struck into something, so that he cried out in triumph. Was it an echo, or a rustle of the branches merely, above the high park wall—or was it a loud whisper, followed by a hushing serpent-like sound—that sent Dick Cox flying over pale and hedge, across the fields again, for bare life, after that first look he had given! At the same moment Simon Gray stumbled, falling head-foremost into the hole they had made, and with a deep groan, lay still. The constable had turned to look also, drawing his staff in the act, but at the sight he saw, staggered and became petrified—for he beheld, in the broad moonlight, among the bright colourless leaves, a form that rose and sat upon the cope of the old hoary wall, silently surveying him. What to him was the most terrifying thing of all, more than the bleached whiteness of the form or the ashy

colourlessness of the unmoved visage—he recognized no one, no likeness to any one he had ever seen, yet knew the hat. It was the same grey ancient one, as he saw in that dreadful moment by the full moonshine—with the same marks and stains, the same unwonted fashion and shape, the very same small holes drilled strangely through the top—which he had had in charge and locked safe up some hours before. As yet the form spoke not, but when it made an awful sign of the pale hand, as if to speak, the constable brought to mind the knowledge that he must be silent, not taking the first word—trying only, with both hands together, to kneel and repeat the beginning of the creed ; but a power was upon him, so that it was merely fragments of a Dissenter's hymn, by Dr. Watts. Then it seemed to him that the spirit, looking down upon him majestically, in some anger, was in a strange way restrained from rushing down against him.

“Speak, speak !” said the same loud whisper of a voice, whether the voice of the form or not, he could not say after : but it appeared rather in the air. “Tell, if you can. If not, say so.”

“What—oh, what, your worship—your lordship !” answered Smith the constable, having his tongue then loosed.

“About the body,” returned the whisper, though the form frowned. “*His* property, stupid mortal. What use is it to any one else ?”

“*Was it a murder ?*” solemnly asked the constable, striving for a desperate discharge of his duty : but at the sight of an angry writhing in the form above, he fell and buried his head in the skirts of Simon Gray, to escape from view of it. As for Simon, he lay quite still, having altogether swooned away from the constable's help.

“A murder—aye—that it was ! A dirty one, too !” was the angry answer, hissing down to him, as if the form struggled to follow. “Oaf ! dolt,” it said, in a

new voice, fiercely, "you seem to know, I say—you've no right to my property—can't stuff it if you had—can't put glass eyes in it—or what's more, can't——" With that he was making a spring at the constable and the hole with the tools, but the latter had plucked up manhood again, at the conviction it was some mad murderer rather than any spirit of a victim; and being a strong man, a blacksmith, prepared a levelling stroke at it as it shot up over him, magically darkening—though at that moment, whether from an unaccountable force that touched him senseless, or from the sudden appalling of his dazzled eyes, he knew no more. Till he found himself getting up, coming-to, all alone; all bright and still in the wood, though the uproar of the alarmed village met him as he fled to it. Simon Gray had revived, and hurried yelling for help to the constable, taking him for dead from fear, and had come battering like a distracted person at the tavern door, which, early though it was, had been closed upon the uneasy company. Yet Simon, when the constable was safe, without visible hurt, avowed that he had seen nothing to be afraid of, only heard his own name suddenly called from behind them, by a whispering voice he perfectly well knew could not be there, for it seemed the gamekeeper's; which made him naturally stumble, so as in fact to stun his head on the point of the constable's own pickaxe, the blood from which he did not need to show, as it trickled down. Their accounts were hard to put together. Then there was one statement of the constable's—as to his last glimpse of the alleged being that interrupted them, seen by Dick Cox also ere he took to flight—which told at the time like a mere raving of one in liquor, as if he had seen double at the instant he spoke of. Namely, that as the bright figure vanished over his head with that black shock to him, it dragged with it, like its hooded shadow flashing into the same brightness, the very Fiend himself—the well-known being, needing no description by the constable to his hearers—leaping with the other, holding it or held by

it in some clanking leash, and laughing back a fearful laugh to *its* anger, as he lost his recollection—seeming, indeed, to have beheld endless numbers of them then, rattling and joining against him in shifting succession, now bright, now black, in one single moment. He *did* have a half-drunken air for a little while, did the constable; yet needed only some stimulants to sober him, after which he said he believed there were really but *two*. The constable was not more daunted than a man might well be. Convinced he was he said quietly, that there had been an old murder in the case—what was more, that it was not the spirit of the murdered man he had beheld. It was, he avowed solemnly, that of the murderer himself, condemned to seek and haunt about the place—with one that should be nameless in charge of him—until the murdered bones were found and laid in consecrated soil. More still, he was resolved to find those bones and set the thing at rest. The hat, he found, was still safe, and whether belonging to criminal or victim, he kept it firmly for the next active steps.

Thus agreed—to the manful good sense of the constable, hardly known before—the parish-clerk himself, the sexton, Mr. Muggops as well. The whole of Hinchbridge accorded and approved. There was an effect produced upon the very Curate, when their deputation went to him that same night, which was a Saturday night, with his sermon on the recent trouble scarcely finished. As for immediate measures by the authorities, Sunday itself was not to hinder application after service to the Squire in such a case; neither could a message be improper, through the Bailiff, over to the Hall by the ordinary road; for the Bailiff was of all Hinchbridge most alarmed when he heard the last news, about “the well-known *being*”; and as to Chipping Lane, it was for the present a sealed route except to legal steps, if not for ever after to all. Meanwhile, there were serious thoughts everywhere, with a desire for morning-service that brooked no delay; till all

Hinchbridge had gathered to church, to worship, confess, and pray. Who was the murdered—who the murderer—till then they asked not; only knew as yet there was some secret and unexpiated murder.

Dr. Smith had sharply disclaimed, in a perfect fever of excitement and annoyance, any part in the maddening business—any title to be consulted or looked-to as a justice. Still, with all Hinchbridge, he went to church. The very sexton (beadle also) was inside this time. Not a member of the tavern household was absent; not a member of the Grange family. The Curate lengthened the service by a morning sermon; couched against superstition, it nevertheless allowed for the wiles and the avenging charge of the great Enemy, the Wicked One. And meanwhile the street of Hinchbridge was still, deserted, silent as a dream; the houses empty, the casements without eyes, the very children and oldest people away; the Bailiff and the "Deane Arms" folks, the Poplar Farm people, with Cox and Gray, reassuring themselves and taking courage, before the search without a clue. It was then that the crowning event occurred, and though commonplace at first, it seemed as if the desires for further light were answered while they uttered them, in the broadest Sunday sunshine.

Before the morning service ended, Sarah Flake's turn to leave the Grange pew came round; as the other servant, the new one, would have done another Sunday. She had the house-door key, and the ordinary kitchen necessities to provide for, in time for dinner before the evening-service. As she crossed the green and approached the lane, she thought, too, it was quite as well it was broad noon, and a Sunday; because a figure at the top of the bank, by Muggops's, appeared to her to be watching the house in a suspicious way, vanishing as she eyed it. A perfect stranger he seemed, with an oddish sort of hat. She found the new door by the new front-gate all safe to her latch-key, and the house-door itself quite the same when she unlocked it. The

garden-door of the end wing had had strong bolts put inside, and all the windows had new shutters, where they were wanted ; these being fast on a Sunday at church-time, except the sitting-parlour, a new room altogether, with hasps upon the casements. She had not long been in the kitchen, when a knock came to the front-door ; a thing somewhat odd in itself, because the gate-bell should have rung. She was more astonished by far, however, and for a few moments stood in silent amaze, when she had carefully opened the door, with the chain in. The person who stood on the steps before her, silent also, with clothes not so much changed as his face, was no other than the Doctor's late absconded serving-man, Solomon. She repeated his name in her amazement, and Solomon corroborated it,—adding hers in turn. "*Aye, Sarah,*" he said : then asked with a grave, business-like manner, as if naturally taciturn for the present, whether the Doctor was not in ? He wanted to see his late master. No—not about coming back. That was over, no doubt. He wanted to see him, and would wait for him. That was, if Sarah thought fit to allow him in.

There was about the whole aspect of Solomon, that which prevented her from showing any anger, offence, resentment—anything but ceremonious coolness. An air as though he would have looked behind him, though constrained until he got within—an air of abstractedness, to judge from her account afterwards, or of dread, or weariness and haggardness—something indescribably different from Solomon usually, save that it was he. He might, by his manner, have perhaps gone with her toward the kitchen, though the house was so changed that he could not well know it. Sarah, however, showed him to a seat in the large new hall itself, a place fully lighted, where the Doctor would see him at once when he came in, adjoining, also, to the old library just finished in its fresh style, with the workmen's scaffolding still there for the ceiling, the floor unwashed, the rubbish and litter about, so that if he chose he might,

without taking a liberty, look about it and go in to spend the interval ; having no access there, however, to anything but an empty closet at the further end, till the new door to the study should be struck through. In fact, she made an excuse on account of the new cook—Joanna, as her name was—being a stranger to him, from Notley, and shortly to be in ; at which a faint flicker of the old look seemed to come up in his eye, and he nodded. But she had no time or inclination to mention the extraordinary things talked of by all Hinchbridge in the churchyard before service, though these had risen up since his departure.

Not many minutes after, service being over, Mrs. Smythe and the young ladies, as well as Joanna the cook, came in. Without the Doctor, indeed, who had set off for a walk with some others, on the great business. Dr. Smith was very long, on that account, in returning ; but every now and then, as Sarah moved about, she cast an eye into the hall or the library, to see if Solomon became impatient, and saw him as well as heard him leisurely wandering to mark every change or improvement. Nay, the ladies, from the garden window of the dining-room (as in previous days when it was the parlour), were curious to know Solomon's motives, anxious to know the reason of his strange absence, and more than once observed his figure, recognizing it through any change of dress, as he dimly sauntered about. The time of afternoon-service came, only the young ladies going to it, when, if they saw the Doctor beforehand, they were to inform him. Then all, after the bells, was a bright Sabbath silence of the quiet autumn day, flooding in where Mrs. Smythe sat to read, or where the cook, over the Church Catechism, leant back dozing, while Sarah had to mind the roast herself, and partly wonder, more than a mere stranger could, at the late occurrences—partly wonder about Solomon. It was then, on a sudden, that the outer-gate bell rang, and, leaving the roast with Joanna, Sarah had to answer it. There

was a man outside, a perfect stranger, who, in a civil enough way, inquired—odd as it seemed—if some one else, by name a perfect stranger to Sarah, too, were not coming out yet. She stared at him, answering accordingly. No such person, she said, had come in, or was likely so to do. At that the stranger began to raise his voice ; explaining, however, that it was the Doctor's late servant. "He was not going to deny his senses. He would kick his heels a little longer in the neighbourhood, but she might tell him he was wanted as soon as possible—and an eye upon him, too." The man did not wait further, but went off in the same bold way, up towards the back of the tavern, where he could have watched the gate, if he wished. There was something to her eye unaccountably frightful in this man, for all his civility ; and not wishing to alarm Solomon, who was safer, she felt, to see the Doctor first, she made no haste to mention the circumstance.

When Dr. Smith arrived, as he did, early in the evening, he was not only astonished at her first information to him, forgetting all else—but with a very irritated temper and prompt pace, turned back to the library at hand ; calling to the fellow impatiently, the more indignant not to see him. But Solomon was not in the library, or in the closet, nor any trace of him ; he was not in the passage, or anywhere else. Perhaps he had tired of waiting, or heard the inquiries for him—but at any rate he must be in the house ; which was searched in vain, however, from top to bottom. The premises, newly made complete in inclosure, with glass upon the walls, every gap in the hollies repaired, did not contain him, as far as investigation could discover ; nor could he have slipped out in broad daylight, nor escaped out of the windows, still fastened within, every one of them. Either he wanted to stay, or must have been most mysterious in his evasion : and as to sending out through the village, through the dusk by that time, or by the dark, or the moonshine, it was useless. Dr. Smith knew

ne was in the house still, for whatever cause ; and said so to every one. The less curious, therefore, that a stranger from the tavern, who had kept his eye on the gate till dusk, suddenly seemed to be persuaded of this ; though he came in at once, settled his score, and hastened round to the back of the Grange, which led the Notley way, into Kent. By the latter road, the last that was seen of him, he went rushing off, asking at passengers, peering into the very hedges, and finally running on at speed.

This was a singular incident ; but about midnight, or after it, when the family had long settled to bed, there was one yet more singular. The shrieks of Sarah Flake were all at once heard, from her bed, with the cries of the cook for a doctor, for salts, for water, for help, for all kinds of aid the least likely. It was nothing outwardly wrong, nothing in the way of apparent danger, for the cook slept beside Sarah, and had seen or heard nothing except Sarah's waking from a dream. A dream, it had been, of Solomon—a dream, at least, when they informed her so, and her master, from a becoming distance outside their safe bedchamber, had very sternly informed her that it must be so. The whole statement she had recently given, in fact, might have been so, he said angrily, for all that anybody else knew. She did her best to get composed ; but the fact remained that in her dream, if dream it was, Solomon had come to her very eyes again—telling her, as he could not wait longer for the Doctor, that he was dead—murdered—lying somewhere—among the pheasant-copses !

This Dr. Smith could no longer stand. The sheer and headlong accumulation of irrationalities, the incoherent propensities of one and all to what contradicted reason and common-sense—not only infuriated him, but began to stagger him by their very flagrancy of boldness, as they rushed along with all Hinchbridge to some conclusion. Where was it to end ? Numberless circumstances, besides, as he paced out the night in reckoning

them up, came up to mind and frightened him till dawn ; when he had the chaise got out at Muggops's, and was driven by the boy Jim express to Notley to consult Mr. Price.

He could not rise so early, nevertheless, but what the constable with his posse of professional brethren from Chelmsstone, with warrants from the Squire, the mayor, the rector of the borough, had risen earlier to search the pheasant-copses ; which, as soon as Solomon was named, came to various people's memories about the gamekeeper. Strange to say, the baronet, when asked for his warrant the evening before, even for his permission, had wildly and passionately refused. Strangest of all yet, when Dr. Smith and Mr. Price returned, they could see the whole village returning in awful procession, with horror in their silence and in their looks. Under a secret grassy place, cunningly covered by a rivulet that ran past it under the coppice, they had found the murdered body at last, which required no individual to identify it—neither Muggops of the "Blue Pig," into whose house it was received with no small kindness—nor the cobbler, who set his old stumps of teeth together—nor Sarah, who was at home in strong convulsions. It was the well-known body of poor Solomon, all in the mouldy garments, the battered hat pressed on, with the dripping gaiters, the very driving-gloves, that had stood the test better than the covered face ; from which Dr. Smith himself, shuddering, had to lift the cover and identify it too, then let it fall again, horrified. They had already sent off to Canterbury, post-haste, to arrest and bring Francis Murphy to the inquest in the afternoon : although it was feared that his open direction to Dr. Smith, about that place, might have been a cunning blind after all. Late on the Sunday night, the coach of Sir Thomas Deane, with himself and Lady Deane inside it, had passed the "Deane Arms" for his place in Kent ; rapidly driving, strangely contrary in the new coincidence ; as if to wash his hands of the business, have

nought to do with it, know nothing of it more, and show himself wiser than the whole parish or borough either.

Sarah Flake was apparently—in her prosing literalities of commonplace without meaning—a Sybil, and in her dreams a Pythoness. If the spirit had gone anywhere on earth, further in and plainer than to the house of its late master, it seemed to have taken familiar refuge in the breast of Sarah. Dr. Smith dared not hint to her now of an exorcism, which he had for a very good intention postponed before, and had afterwards thought needless.

CHAPTER XXI.

LEGAL VIEWS OF THE CASE.—THE CORONER'S INQUEST,
THE CONFESSIONS, AND THE SALUTARY EXAMPLE.

“HUMAN nature is curious, my dear sir—very curious,” remarked the little lawyer, with his chin musingly in his hand; as they waited for the inquest in the afternoon. He had not been affected, of course, at Notley, by the mysterious influence. “I set aside all this unaccountable set of superstitious absurdities on the part of—ahem—almost everybody. Gossip, gossip, my good friend—fancy—often mere hearsays, observe, no two persons seeing or saying the same thing. There is a mystery about it still—a great deal of mystery—but a very nice piece of circumstantial evidence so far, notwithstanding. Crime will out, in fact, Dr. Smith—won’t hide. In the meantime, it was a most fortunate circumstance that you came to Notley this morning, as things had turned out—and recollected that man’s face. A mountebank, you say—a strolling clown or player? Um—well. No evidence—no plausibility, even, for your impression that he was some old acquaintance of the poor man, and therefore, recognizing him before the

Fair, murdered him on the night of it, secretly. A pure fancy, which should be avoided in legal matters. Still, just as well he's in charge."

"He is sullen enough now, at any rate," returned Dr. Smith. "Very gloomy indeed. Waiting till the last chance, I suspect. The constable thinks he identifies him with the supposed phantom on the wall."

"There again—phantom, my good friend!" pursued Mr. Price. "This is surprising in *you*—you appeared to place a most extraordinary faith, too, in the poor housemaid's statement. Why, sir, if it were true—if *that* were credible—we should have the most extraordinary case of the supernatural on record. An illusion—a pure illusion, Doctor, believe me. Then, as to the constable's rigmarole—who or what, pray, could have been *that other*? Consider, sir, what it leads to—if credible in one point, it is so in the corresponding one. He saw a soul, led in chains by—by the Old Gentleman—a personage, by the way, assumed for argument's sake—merely assumed. I place far greater weight on your two shots—the two reports you heard that night, toward the hall. Depend upon it, the gist of the question lies there. If the phantom was the stroller you suspect, he could not have been such a fool as to haunt the place—wanting the body found, forsooth, like a mere resurrectionist—a surgeon, if you will. No, I look to the two shots. As to poachers, no poachers would have fired at night—and pheasants are not poached for with guns."

"But on whom to fix?" rejoined his disturbed client. "I cannot bring myself to believe that gamekeeper guilty—I cannot. There was a really genuine air about him, sir. It is a great deal, to know the characters—to have come in contact with the folks as I've done. In pitching on the likeliest person, surely, Mr. Price, this is much. I could not accuse even that fellow Cox, or that man, Gray—much less Hubbard, Muggops, or any one I know." He would have said to Mr. Price, perhaps, if his feeling could have struggled into proper words,—

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in *your* philosophy."

"The knowledge of the Bow Street records—of the Newgate Calendar," persisted the legal gentleman, "sheds an extraordinary light, sir, on human nature. There are things there—links suggested, Doctor—of which you can have no conception. Legal suspicion is a very different matter from that of the mere civilian—not to speak of the moralist or theologian. In looking about a place, I don't so much ask, sometimes, who is the most likely to the superficial eye—but *who*, from that point of the view, is the *unlikeliest*! Besides, are there not neighbours whom you *don't* know—whom you have no means of access to—of thinking about in this light? Though they may occur at once, from a general glance over the case, even, to an impartial, professional, fresh observer. What would you think, now—for illustration sake, merely for illustration, Dr. Smith—of—of the Bailiff? Bailiff Sloane?" But Dr. Smith, bad as had been his experience of the Bailiff, scorned the supposition. "Or—or, to take the very remotest, the highest, the *unlikeliest* instance of all," pursued his adviser—"of—of your chief enemy—*our* chief opponent, I might say—the—the—very baronet himself!"

As if the old gentleman had received a sudden blow, he fell back—the colour of his face leaving it. "Eh? eh?" he faltered. "Take care—take care for Heaven's sake, Price!" And he looked about the room, his own private study, with alarm and caution.

"You and I, of course, are in strict confidence," resumed the other, lowering his voice. "And this is a serious matter. Yes—taking your own statements into evidence—your own unintentional admissions, Dr. Smith—the conduct also, otherwise inexplicable, of Sir Thomas Deane, after the notorious state of matters at that precise moment in the vicinity and on the Hall estate—sir, I come to a single definite conclusion that *he*, as at least the principal party—*ahem*—well—is involved,

seriously involved—I may venture to say, Dr. Smith, gravely and terribly COMPROMISED!” After this solemn delivery of opinion, as if it had been really a tremendous one indeed, the solicitor leant back, took a slight pinch of snuff, and became further impregnable, inaccessible, legally oracular. His client, once more staggered and horrified, had sprung up in much agitation. “Sir, if there was any grudge between ‘em,” he exclaimed, “I should say Sol—poor Solomon—had the bitterest of it! He actually liked, I now suspect, when I had left it off, to provoke and madden the old baro——” but he stopped, seeing the inference drawn from it by the cool smile of the little lawyer. Other things were rushing back on the Doctor’s recollection, partly his own work, partly the baronet’s; to make him now turn away, putting up both hands to cover his own compunction.

“No fear of a capital sentence,—pooh, my good friend!” rejoined his companion, soothingly. “Not the slightest fear of that, should I prove right—as I predict I shall. The concealment is the worst part of it—*that’s* the most disagreeable-looking feature. Imagine, a proud, domineering Tory baronet, local head of a party, you know, forced—forced at last to make a confession of this kind! But they wouldn’t hang him, bless you! Psha, not so much as bring it to trial—the party at present being *in*. They’d whitewash it. ‘Whitewash,’ Doctor, is the word. Still—still, harkye!” whereupon the lawyer sank his voice to a whisper, gently chafing his hands together—“it might tell—it might tell very forcibly, very forcibly indeed—at the *next election*!”

The old Doctor broke out indignant, stamping on the floor. “The next election be—be hanged *itself*!” he blurted out with a shout. “Don’t you see, too, sir, that but for me—but for me and my coming hereabouts—such a thing could not for a moment have been so much as supposed—imagined—alleged—again a man in Sir Thomas Deane’s elevated position! I—I—’m at the bottom of it all, if it’s true. But it’s false—false, sir—I feel it’s false—I won’t for an instant credit it! And if

it's credible—if it's true—if it's proved, Mr. Price, I tell you I'll leave the place and bury my head in obscurity thenceforth ! ”

Mr. Price was amazed at this turn, sat silent, and would have retracted if he could. He only shook his head.

“ I say I'd rather have given a thousand pounds this hadn't happened,” was the Doctor's continued ejaculation, as he paced about. “ *Twice* the money. What's your Whiggery to me—what's a property—a position, as you call it—anything, anything, sir, compared with disgrace of this kind—remorse—ruin, one may say, to an old, honoured family ? Talk of a spectre—a ghost ! Why, *this* would haunt me—it'll haunt me to my dying day. And I'd no need, God knows, Price, to be haunted any more than necessary.” It might have been thought the Doctor, writhing himself and working with his hands, was on the point of giving way to weakness.

“ Why, after all,” suggested Mr. Price, thoughtfully, “ it might by possibility be hushed up even now. A few guineas to the sexton and constable—something secure, we'll say, for the man himself, the gamekeeper, who is undoubtedly implicated—if he would agree to go abroad at once. With a post-chaise to the nearest sea-port—from the village, here, where they've no better lock-up after the inquest, as you heard, you know, than the church-vestry—get the inquest protracted as much as possible—the simplest thing in the world—and the vestry key to-night—why, really—that's to say, if he has friends at hand—if the baronet himself has friends at —— ”

“ No, no, Mr. Price,” said the Doctor, slowly withdrawing his doubtful eye, as he ceased to hesitate. “ It must, I see, be gone on with. It would not do. Truth, I find, is best. Even if it *could* be hushed up,—I must be prepared to appear in evidence at the trial, myself—Mrs. Smythe, even, and my young niece ! They were with me that same night, sir.” In the effort to compose himself to the resolution, there was a considerable air of moral dignity ; which did not escape even Mr. Price. But

soon afterwards they were told that Murphy had been found at Canterbury, and had been just brought by the posting activity of the constables. The coroner had arrived at Muggops's, in whose kitchen the jury came together, to "sit upon the body"; though, of course, in its state, at that still autumnal season, the body was not laid on the table round which the jury sat, but in the back-scellery, with the door closed after they had sufficiently surveyed it. They were not paying the deference of waiting for the Doctor and Mr. Price, as most people wished: because the coroner thought too much importance was given to the Doctor already, while his attorney was a Kent man, a Whig agent, who had nothing to do with the case. Enough if the Doctor were sent for, to be in time to be present if he chose: which he had been most determined to do, and came up with Mr. Price very sharply.

Above, in separate rooms, were the two suspected men, the ex-gamekeeper, and the stroller, who was still sullen, only giving his name as William Robinson. As to Murphy, after seeing the remains in the scullery, he seemed almost as sullen; refusing to admit anything, in fact having been warned that if he did, it would be used in evidence. As he was taken upstairs again, the only thing he said, was to request that a message might be sent to Sir Thomas, who was not present. But Sir Thomas, he was informed, was at his place in Kent—and having already been sent to with sufficient information, was found to be too ill in bed to hear it. Then Francis Murphy shrugged his shoulders together, setting his lips; after one muttered remark that it would be time enough at the trial at the assizes.

Enough, that it had been evident the cause of death was gunshot—more likely two gunshots, loaded heavily, so much had the hat been riddled, and the countenance disfigured, blown away, singed, and blackened, as if the shots must have been very near indeed. Nay, a heavy slug-shot or two had dropped out, being carefully enclosed

in paper beside the main subject of the inquest—though they could be brought out for any gentleman entitled to see them. What was more, so also had been thoughtfully made the case with a piece of rope, shorn off by the constable at a respectful distance, from the end of a cord, itself fragmentary and half-rotted—which inside the coat-collar had been so entangled as to give the victim a choked expression, awful to behold—indicating perhaps a darker inveteracy of crime on the murderer's part, than anyone had yet ventured to suggest.

"Our finding, then, gentlemen," said the coroner, rising up at the end of the table, and taking off his spectacles—"your finding, I beg pardon, gentlemen—will thus probably be a return of 'Wilful murder' upon the body of the late man, Solomon, and so on, 'by means of a gunshot or gunshots, on the part of some person or persons unknown'—or rather, I should say myself, 'on the part of Francis Murphy, late gamekeeper at the Hall, in the Hall preserves, whether assisted or not by some person or persons unknown.'"

"About the rope, though, Mr. Coroner," remarked the Chelmstone foreman, respectfully, "there are a certain view amongst some gentlemen that it ought to be took notice about in the findin'. Strangle-ation, some of us is sayin', it strikes me—ought for to come in. Speak up, gemmen, to Mr. Coroner—if it's uncorrect, you'll be told as much."

Here Dr. Smith, however, had got in ; making a most unseemly interruption by his inquiry about the said rope. The faces of the retired medical man with the annuity, of the eccentric beetle-collector from Chelmstone, of the Coroner himself—who had written on Natural History—of the two Chelmstone surgeons or apothecaries, or whatever they were—stared at his inquisitive officiousness, and abrupt remarks ; but in vain. The Squire, the Curate, and the Chelmstone Rector, accommodated with seats behind the coroner, manifestly shared the impression that it was unbecoming, for he seemed per-

sonally set against the coroner, when that gentleman declined any further examinations of the body, or any direct introduction of it on the table. They went on with the proceedings while he was allowed to go in himself, accompanied by a constable and surgeon. The sexton took a trowel at his express request, to turn the poor object over, and so shift it that the rope could be observed: nor could Dr. Smith deny the facts. Even the surgeon held his nose behind, looking supercilious and huffy.

"Stay, stay there, sexton," persevered the obstinate old gentleman, with some difficulty composing himself, but resolutely putting on his spectacles, advancing a little, stooping as near as he could. "What's that—under the coat-skirt, sexton? Let's see it—turn it up, man—lift it with your trowel, I say."

"The rope, sir—the rope! Can't you see?"

The surgeon observed, with much impatience, "A piece of the same rope, sir—we've seen it all already—I thought you'd identified before; and as to a *post-mortem*, I trust, as it was *my* part of the business——"

"Rope! rope?" was the quick rejoinder, as the Doctor almost brushed him aside, striding forward and actually touching the thing without gloves, then giving it a violent tug. "This is not a rope—nothing of the kind! It's—a—look here, Price, look here! All of you! For good sake look at that—this—feel it—pull it—don't be afraid, Mr. Surgeon! Come, pray, Mr. Coroner! Excellent! excellent! ha! ha! ha! It's—it's all right—all right—what a deliverance! What a relief, I say, Price! Oh!" And he fairly gasped, after laughing, springing about, hurrying to get the crowded inmates of the scullery to comprehend, till he must have been thought mad.

"I *do* declare," muttered the Notley lawyer at last, as he raised his eyes and then wiped his fingers, "'tis neither more nor less than—than—a tail. Yes, a hairy one, too. Is it known, gentlemen, may I ask, that deceased had—had a—such an appendage behind?" Yet

to the constable, to the sexton, to many others near, this discovery was so far from an obstacle, that it was only augmenting their horror for a few moments. Then some of the jury ceased to gape, and began to laugh. "It's about as much Solomon," loudly proclaimed his late master, "as it's—no matter—but who it is I'll tell you, Mr. Coroner and gentlemen of the jury—it's the caravan people's ape, monkey, or ourang-outang! In my livery, I own. It ain't, I assure you, sir—a British quadruped, or bird, or a beetle. I think you'd better put it back again, in the ditch. Good-day, gentlemen—good-day, Mr. Surgeon!" Whereat the old bachelor from the Grange walked away out, less in mirth than in radiant delight, along with Mr. Price.

It was when they were out in front of the tavern that Dr. Smith recollected the two men in custody, and growing grave again, turned back. Mr. Price, however, had found himself in a hurry, as it was getting late; and only ordered out his gig to be driven away home by Mr. Gimble.

The first visit was to Francis Murphy, still upstairs in a locked room, which the constable scarce could make up his mind as yet to leave open. "Keep the other man a little, pray, constable," whispered the Doctor, "and leave us, a few minutes." To Murphy he at once broke the unexpected solution of this dark-looking business; though in a considerate way, which was by no means superfluous. For the young man still gazed at him for a little, as if the enigma did not forthwith vanish. There was really nothing vulgar about this ex-gamekeeper's sudden perception of the truth, nor in the relief of mind he manifested, more for the supposed victim and the supposed criminal than himself: but his surprise was betrayed by a characteristic deficiency of caution or cunning. "A trick—a sly trick, sure enough!" he exclaimed: "'faith, it must have been cleverly managed, too! Though the fellow must be a devil after all, if he meant it so bad for Sir Thomas as it's been—and—why, sir, the sooner it's explained—broken,

like, you know, to his honour—softer, even, than you've done to *me*—the truth is, Dr. Smith, I—I——” with which he would have urged post-haste by his gesture as well as his words, till he saw that he had let out too much, and that no message, no letter, perhaps, could serve the object. “*Hush!*” said the Doctor, signing him down again. “It's in safe hands, I hope, Murphy, my good lad. You may trust me not to pry about any matter of yours, which you wish secret—as I do *you*, that there's nothing bad in it. With regard to Solomon—no—no—various incidents, since then, prove to me that the fellow could not have conceived the whole which might happen. Did it half at random, probably—bad enough as it was. No human being could have contemplated the whole! No one, I say—nobody on earth, be he as mischievous as he may, or reckless, or spiteful—*could* guess, depend upon it, much less contrive—how the ball was to roll when once set a-going. We're rid of the poor wretch *this* time, too, for good—I warrant me he don't come back *again!*”

After that, there was little further explanation needed, to enable both of them to understand it so far. The game-keeper had known nothing of it till he came up that night to the preserve which was being guarded so, by one whom he had been ordered to join at a certain hour—and rather past his time, had not even heard the rustle of the boughs in the roost-trees near the corner of Chipping Lane, which had prepared the watcher there. But he certainly had caught a glimpse in the distance, of the descending figure he took for the Doctor's man, lighting down on the cope of the wall, in the well-known clothes—then, at the sound of an oath from the copse, it had flourished in one hand a fine cock-pheasant, half torn, still kicking and screaming—nor only so, but had turned round, mowing and mopping, grimacing, gibbering, and making unnatural laughter at the enraged watcher of the covert, who without further patience let fly—both barrels, one after the other, a most determined shot, certainly, from a good hand and eye—which dropped the creature stone-dead in a

moment from the wall, inside. No suspicion had ever struck either of them, then, that there were others in the lane below. All was still after the shots—and what was done after, was done hurriedly, without time to think, away from the vicinity altogether: a solemn oath being exchanged before they parted never to betray the accident if it could be kept. In fact, the Fair and the supposed absconding of the man had helped it. It was not likely, Murphy agreed, though, that the mountebank, at all events, could intend having his property destroyed: and he thought, in addition, that in this case he must have been at hand; nay, the brute could scarce have been managed by a stranger. As for the caravan, it had remained for two or three days, exhibiting as before, the learned wild man performing as usual, seen by many with great wonder; as the gamekeeper was able to testify, having narrowly missed walking up himself, with a queer vague attraction amidst all his mental trouble.

"No one but yourself, Murphy," said the Doctor, "will do to go and set things right. After that, of course, it may find its way out, just as it happens. I shan't help it in any way—Solomon is gone—this mountebank is a stranger here, with his caravan near Chichester, being, for a merryman, too, far from any appearance of enjoying a jest. My own solicitor I can fully depend upon."

"'Twill leak out, sir," answered the young man, with a shake of the head. "Pretty near as bad as ever in the long run, if you'll take my word for it, sir. A gentleman couldn't go among his friends after it, not to speak of the commonalty. There's something about the notions of game, if you'll believe me, sir—or poachers either—that comes against it. I don't know very well what to say. 'Tis a nasty business, at best."

"I tell you what—yes—ha!" was the old gentleman's abrupt rejoinder. "First, though, do *you* wish to take to the same line again? Will you not, rather, try my former offer—with very good salary, mind? *Pay*, we'll call it—the situation being of a general sort—expectations, recollect, advantageous in no small——"

"Pray, sir, say no more on these points," said Murphy, colouring. "I like Hinchbridge at any rate, Dr. Smith—I'm not too proud to work, sir, and take wages—that I would, and gladly—if—if *this* could be settled first."

"Well, then, Frank Murphy, my man, I'll tell you what," answered the Doctor, putting his head slightly on one side, with a shrewd air; "go off straight this very evening, then come back, groom the mare, and let it leak out—*leak out*, observe—that you were *alone*, young man, *when you did it*."

Francis Murphy looked straight at his new employer for about a minute; then he made an emphatic movement of his hand and caught up his hat. "To be open with you, sir," said he; "before this occurred, I was in the way of paying my addresses to a—young woman in the place—Miss Muggops, in fact, as I daresay it's known. Quite serious the intentions were on my part, and I trust I've about as much chance as before, such as that was. Anyhow, she won't look askance on me, d'ye think, sir, for—for the matter of a—well—a monkey?"

"If she did," replied Dr. Smith, with conclusive dignity, "Miss Muggops would prove herself—what I don't suppose her—a very silly young woman indeed."

Dr. Smith found the imprisoned stroller, by one of those curious but natural coincidences often thronging about us unnoticed in life, seated in the upstairs-parlour he had himself occupied when he first came to Hinchbridge, in his own old arm-chair, looking out of the open back-window, over the gardens and trees, in the direction of the half-concealed Grange—sullen as before, however, and on the whole, for anything of a comic man, remarkably doleful, as well as gloomy; nor did he rise at the Doctor's entrance, but only turned partly round in the chair.

"I suppose," said the latter, gravely, "there's no objection to my knowing your real name?"

"Real name?" repeated the haggard fellow, who was not so much old as used up and broken down, though his legs and arms still displayed a gymnastic aptitude for feats of agility. He seemed to recollect. "Well, sir," said he, dully, and scarcely civil, "it's Robert Williamson." After which the Doctor, with those seared eyes blinking at him, scarce knew what to say next, and hemmed. "I s'pose," resumed the man, "it's no use my waiting longer? Wouldn't be worth the stuffing by this time?"

"What d'ye mean—stuff what?" asked the old gentleman, much repelled, yet trying to conceal it.

"Why, the Doctor, to be sure," was the answer. "I tell ye, I wouldn't have given him—even stuffed—not for *two* Swedish Ladies!" And the man, if he could have felt the movement which all but brings tears, might have been thought to feel it then—only scowling, however, on account of it.

"I wish to know from you, if you'll tell me," pursued Dr. Smith, repressing his impatience, "what may have become of Solomon? Have you any traces of him?"

"Any traces of him?" replied the man, appearing to think. "Become of Solomon? Traces of who—who's Solomon, mister? Don't know about any Solomon. If it's John Glubb you mean, I know about *him*, sure enough. What d'ye want to keep him up for now, sir?—what's the use of him to ye?—that's all?"

"You mean Solomon, my late servant," said Dr. Smith, fixing him at last. "I don't understand, though. Please to explain."

"It's not that he was of much use, performing," was the sulky reply. "He took awhile, d'ye see; but people looked like tiring of it; reason was, it wasn't, somehow, natural. That's where it was; not natural. As to acrobatics, or anything at all in the climbin' line, he not only couldn't touch Doctor Jacko, but he daren't. They'd have soon twigg'd—smoked it before long, and ruined me, sir.

The man had loudly called for a mug of ale, paid for it, and told them the old gentleman seemed unwell, through the late business—before Dr. Smith's summonses could be answered. He walked out coolly, deliberately walked away, then, as he caught the Chichester stage-coach at the "Deane Arms," an outside seat,—was saved all speed to get away, into the falling dusk.

It is not to be supposed that these events were without benefit of a most salutary kind to all Hinchbridge. It had all been turned-up, turned-over, as it were, and strangely ventilated. Not merely did they have less fear of outer ghosts thereafter, but there were inner fears that came home and made all ghosts trivial by comparison. Great had been the defeat to Sir Thomas, in his mere silence, in his not returning at all, for the present, from the place in Kent. But no one ventured to crow over him as yet, and if there were changes carried on still, their progress was not so hurried as it might have been. Dr. Smith at the Grange began to walk more softly, and had grown more temperate in his zeal, more straightforward and open in his modes of action. He was growing charitable to old Mayor Singleton, even. Then, Sarah Flake found out something, which moderated her regrets : while Mr. Muggops looked upon her with an interest, at times, almost solemn. And Francis Murphy was the Doctor's smart and pleasant-mannered groom, driver, general assistant and factotum ; not in drab and brown livery, but in such clothes as might be considered plain. As to the real fate of Solomon, it continued, like his personal character, somewhat of a mystery to the end.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DOCTOR'S "TRUMP CARD," OR GRANDEST STROKE.

A LITTLE more than a year must be conceived to have elapsed, producing not a few changes in Hinchbridge,

only too gradual to require notice here. The truth was, this term of Nugent's absence abroad was a good deal more than past, and by whole weeks of gusty weather, at the usual equinoctial time of spring, Mrs. Smythe had been made very uneasy about a certain good ship, the "Ringdove," from the Brazils, which it appeared to her must be labouring in the utmost danger when the bedroom windows of the Grange rattled, and the rain drove against them, and the bare trees of the lane were groaning, while all the woods of Hinchbrook and the Hall went roaring like a sea. Even the great battle of Trafalgar, with the great Lord Nelson's death, had given her no small alarm during the latter part of those two years, lest the perils of the ocean might only be escaped for another of blood, a fate like his lordship's, or a dungeon under the vengeance of the terrible Buonaparte; and she now wondered that the late happy decease of Mr. Pitt, the present lamentable illness of Mr. Fox, the expected intentions of His Majesty, the imminent dissolution of Parliament, could so occupy the thoughts of Dr. Smith and the Squire, as to make the "Ringdove's" delay a comparative trifle. When the arrival was at last mentioned by the way in a corner of the newspaper, there was absolutely no special intimation at all except of having spoken the "Mary Adams," for Pernambuco, all well, and seen icebergs, and had a tedious voyage, with calms, but fine weather. Timber was the cargo, filled up with a new sort of ballast, said to be capable of useful application; but no remark alluded in the most distant way to any passenger; and why the old bachelor, her brother-in-law, handed it to her with an air of such speechless exultation, was hard to see. The next post, certainly, converted the whole into priceless satisfaction, by bringing Nugent's own letter, in which perfect health and high spirits were expressed, with promises of a heavy package by the carriers, and anticipations of being able ere long to snatch a visit in spite of business. How he could defer, why he implied the idea of mere temporary return and permanent absence, was

almost as unaccountable as the perplexing conduct of his uncle, while it was of course incalculably more difficult to bear. Dr. Smith at first seemed quite to take it for granted, and to approve; he busily corresponded with Nugent, as if contributing to the long postponement, till June had fully blown and kindled round, and all the lanes were verdurous, the fields luxuriant, the air radiant and alive with sultriest summer. Then his growing excitement through public affairs reached a sudden pitch, amidst which, after much closeting with Mr. Price and preparation of papers, he abruptly made known his purpose to visit Town. Scarce appearing to attend to all the messages, the urgent pressings to hasten Nugent, the pieces of news or scraps of writing intrusted for him, the Doctor responded but unsatisfactorily to every question about his nephew's plans in life, his prospects of ultimate settlement at home, or of openings for him in the vicinity. He did not profess to know Nugent's views or wishes; he was independent, he was of age, he would judge for himself, no doubt he could make a run down ere long. Politics appeared so to engross the old gentleman that the mother again disposed herself to regard him more in the old light of a worldly old bachelor and strange whimsical person, than as sometimes reminding her of the Rector, or with friendly esteem; much less could she complain of him now, as too indulgent to Lizzy, too apt to humour the fancies of Jane, perhaps inclined to spoil Nugent when he came back, through excessive partiality. He was suffered to hurry away somewhat unceremoniously, and to post off for London without other company to the "Deane Arms" than Murphy and his portmanteau. The letters from both were equally hasty and curt, nor did either of them seem so much interested in coming home again to Hinchbridge, as in how opinions ran there, whether Chelmsstone would support opposition to Colonel Deane, and in what manner a new candidate could most quietly be brought down to canvass the neighbourhood.

The Hall was once more occupied by the Deanes, and

Sir Thomas had again shown an inclination to reside there, to concern himself in local affairs, and resume his place in the county. Nothing but politics, perhaps, could have raised the old baronet's spirit there, or revived his attention to the place. He rode about less, indeed, displaying a more moderate temper, as well as showing a degree of self-control, with a diminution of pomposity; the bailiff condescended to use influence as often as broad hints, and argument along with authority, speaking more of Sir Thomas's wishes than his will: but still the loss of a single borough might do more than take away a vote, the least weakening of the Ministry in the new House, it was feared, might cause a resignation, and loyalty had become so precious amidst the boldness of Dissenters, the talk of sinecures, the cant of liberality, and the attack on colonial privileges and the rights of the planters, that Colonel Deane wrote anxious notes by every post, and the baronet's zeal in upholding him grew stronger each day. It could not be concealed that Chelmstone was wavering, new interests had got a footing there, and Mayor Singleton, above all, evinced a very equivocal amount of personal feeling against the family. It was the Colonel himself who took alarm in time, and being surer far of another borough in the North, where a Parliamentary friend was snugly lodged, proposed at once to make an exchange agreed on by the latter, whose rank and popularity in the House could leave nothing uncertain. Lord Chively had consented to allow himself to be put in at Chelmstone, and would even come down personally, in the circumstances, to address the free and enlightened constituency of that thriving place when all was settled: a plan to which Sir Thomas cordially assented, and to execute which he threw himself openly into the scene; nor by any means less impetuously, that opposition was fairly avowed through Mayor Singleton and Dr. Smith, on behalf of a namesake of the latter. The same Honourable Mr. Smith, it was supposed, of dashing Whig sentiments, who

at the first attempt of the kind in the sacred precincts of Lower Chelmsstone, had so decorously veiled a signal defeat. And that the Squire was said privately to favour the rash design, at least to have declared himself neutral, was a fact not all propitious to the new cause, however flagrant in its boldness.

At the Grange, however, every such concern was one fine morning thrown into the remote shade and quite obliterated, by the Chichester night-stage bringing to the "Deane Arms" door two well-known inside passengers, Doctor Smith and his nephew Nugent, whose luggage remained a mighty heap for Murphy to fetch afterwards, as they hastened along the village, a spectacle to every door, and turned without stopping a moment, past the "Blue Pig," down to the Grange gate. A minute more, and Nugent—grown a young man and still brown from foreign parts, maturely dressed, too, in rather fashionable clothes, with powder in his hair and diamond shoe-buckles,—was clasped in his mother's arms. Lizzy, herself shooting up in diminished plumpness, did not know him at first; while Jane retreated with a little scream from the approach: but Sarah yelled recognition, and purred round his fallen hat, fawned over his cloak as she bore it in, cried at sight of the luggage, finally seating herself on it in the passage with a sort of faintness; while to Mrs. Smythe herself the changes were but after-thoughts; the complexion, the stature, the deepened tone, the shaved cheek, no disguise—but only apologies for tears and fresh caresses. He was going to settle down there, at Hinchbridge. Not now, perhaps—but after. Some day—when—when Jane there, and Lizzy here, were married, no doubt—and when Uncle Joshua—no, when his uncle and she needed company. Nugent turned towards his uncle affectionately. He owed enough to his uncle already, he said, without unseating him altogether; she could have no notion what his uncle wanted him to accept—in fact had made him

accept, though of course it was a mere form—a step necessary to his rising, as Uncle Joshua fancied he could rise, to honour and distinction, even to—to——

“Hush, hush, Nugent,” interrupted Doctor Smith, “we musn’t anticipate—the other sex can’t—can’t for the life of ’em, my dear boy, keep a secret. You mean you’re a proprietor in the county, above three hundred per annum, certainly—more than twice that—the Grange and Poplar Farm are worth seven, as they stand. They’ll be worth a thousand in a year or two. I’ve got the dye-work at Chelmstone, with other property there—not to speak of a few little matters besides. Only I stay here, mind—it’s a condition—it’s a—a—what d’ye call it, as the books say—help me, man, with your scholarship!”

“A *sine quâ non*, of course,” said Nugent, laughing, nor less because of his mother’s perplexity. “Of course, sir, I shan’t turn you out, even along with ‘mamma’ here.”

“Certainly not,” was the gleeful rejoinder. “For all else—you’re of age, mind—you’re of age—you may take your own course. You’re independent, sir. Sentiments independent also, I hope. And as for information, knowledge of life, education, et cetera, you’ve evidently profited by your opportunities, I allow. What I’m most afraid of is—not that you can’t get up a speech, or seem inclined to be nervous—but when the moment comes, you see, with a crowd of faces gaping at you, and ever so many you’ve known before, why—it is rather a trial to the memory, not to speak of one’s presence of mind! Then a rotten egg ain’t exactly a refresher to it—nor drums, cows’ horns, and beating on frying-pans! Never mind, my boy, I’ll back you up like brass—I’ll prompt you—you’ll have lots of friends, and the more noise the better—only wave your hand, flourish your fist, look spirited and emphatic, and keep your mouth open, putting in a word or two at the gaps, with a few good phrases—you’ll carry all before you! The canvass—the canvass is the thing! As our friends

at the caravan could have told us at the same spot ! Now, as soon as you've had lunch, we'll be off, you know—no time to spare !”

Nugent did appear a little excited and nervous, though he laughed, helping himself gaily to the sherry on the table, rather than to cold chicken-pie and ham, which were being pressed on him by his mother, fortunately for her ideas as to the sobriety or sanity of both the travellers. Dr. Smith, for his part, was in a flighty state of unusual elevation and talkativeness, and partook liberally of cold brandy-and-water ; they were restless to go out about the garden, seeing and showing the improvements, ready to recognize a passing acquaintance or exchange words with a neighbour, however humble ; actually speaking of a drive before dinner to Chelmstone, of visits to people about, and of not offending Mayor Singleton by delay to call, of returning by the other road and perhaps surprising Squire Ashburton among his mowers. Still they were in the way of the household bustle as long as they stayed in : nor was it altogether unnatural to feel a little excitement to be got rid of in this restless way ; for Mrs. Smythe and everybody else felt it too.

“ Now Nugent,” asked the Doctor, as soon as the chaise had cleared the new front gate (with the globes on the tops of the pillars), “ don't you think we might rather take the Squire on our way, and strike while the iron is hot—before they hear, in fact, of your arrival ! You're no Whig, you know—though you mayn't be just a Tory—you're independent—liberality and caution combined—the Constitution as much as Reform—eh ? He could scarcely help fixing himself in the moment—next thing to a pledge. And if the Squire declares himself in your favour—no matter how personally, you know—the effect in Chelmstone secures us at once.”

On this point the young man had already evinced a degree of shyness, and he now coloured slightly, avoiding his uncle's glance. His answer was, for all that, in a quite decided tone, as if he had thought of it be-

fore and made up his mind. "I prefer coming *back* that way, sir, as we had fixed—after seeing over the town and arranging with Mr. Singleton. Indeed I like better that Mr. Ashburton and his family should not be surprised at the visit—if we *do* make it so early as this afternoon. Besides, for my own part, I do not mean to leave him the slightest ground for feeling himself entrapped. The call at Hinchbrook is certainly a business one—altogether formal and on public grounds—but I shall plainly state my sentiments and views for the future. I am no politician as yet, of course—as I said, my object is to get into a position to become so, and, if I can, distinguish myself in public life. I would no more vote unless convinced, than I should attempt to speak till I could ensure a hearing. But as for a country life—here or anywhere—I had rather stay at a counting-house desk in London, or go abroad again!"

"Exactly—exactly, my dear boy," said his uncle. "Don't suppose for an instant I would prescribe to you. Drive up, Murphy—through the village." Dr. Smith sat back, for a time seeming inclined to whistle in a subdued manner, to himself.

They saw the Mayor forthwith at Chelmstone, and then in an easy style began to walk through the town, dropping in here and there, seeing over the brewery, visiting the dyework, the wool-mill, and the paper manufactory; the borough school was patronizingly looked in upon, the Dissenting preacher met in the street and talked to; and the gossiping barber nevertheless allowed to hear, as he dressed the distinguished-looking young gentleman's hair in his primmest manner, that the stranger differed on ecclesiastical points from his well-known companion, admiring the fine old church which darkened the shop-window, and being himself the son of a clerical dignitary, and proposing to include the Rector in their calls. All the curiosity of Chelmstone was stirred up; weavers with remarkably fine canaries had been nodded to; odd out-of-the-way lanes where

workpeople stayed, with crowds of children or wonfully fine infants, had been pried into and compa with foreign suburbs, or with what they ought to be—and the Mayor himself had been seen attentively showing particular objects to the visitor, or telling him of local wants, or mentioning names of people in sight of their shop-doors,—ere he was thought anything else than the Bishop's eldest son, or a young heir of the Cloynes of the Grange returned from China,—or at all suspected to be Nugent Smythe turned up again, the Doctor's nephew who had run off to the Indies. Yet to leave a popularity behind him of the most growing character, there was only wanted the evening's information, that he had found a diamond in the East, or married a princess, or somehow come home rich enough to buy Poplar farm and the Grange at a vast price from his uncle, whose whimsical speculations had gone to the verge of ruin ; how his good fortune had been like magic, and his quickness was something extraordinary and his gifts of speech were astonishing, but the Mayor, and the Squire, and the Doctor wanted him to give Chelmsstone the first benefit of it all, by standing against Lord Chively in spite of Sir Thomas and Colonel Deane.

Hours before it came all out, however, the chaise had gone round by Oakstead, had stopped at everywhere worth while, and deposited Doctor Smith with his young companion at the end of Hinchbrook avenue, to canvass for the influence of the Squire. Smells of beanfield and tossing hay were all about ; the blossoming lime-trees gave out fragrance and a hum of bees and insects butterflies flitted through the bearded grass, the clover was richly purple, the drowsy croaking of the rookery went on heedless of their approach ; nothing seemed changed there, except that Mr. Ashburton hurried at his fastest gait from the hayfield to greet them, and called out Nugent's name with some emotion as he reached the stile.

“ I heard of it—I heard of it, of course, my dear boy ! ”

he exclaimed, warmly grasping Nugent's hand in two of his. "But only a couple of hours ago! Why not let me know sooner? Mercy on us, how grown!—They are waiting dinner for us, Doctor Smith—impatiently enough, as you may fancy. There they come—some of the young folks. Not stay—stuff! Business—business! Well, we'll talk of it as we go up."

The chaise waited, nevertheless, and they mentioned matters rapidly at the stile. After the first surprise, the Squire collected himself, necessarily agreeing to forego the immediate satisfaction of their company indoors, in favour of a mother's just right. The earliest possible compensation was to be made, though; and for the business—the very unexpected business—why—he must think over it, he would give it his best consideration. It was delicate: it would require the most careful attention.

"The Squire likes you, Nugent—he can't help it—he talked of you constantly in your absence," remarked Doctor Smith as they returned home. "The day's our own, my dear fellow—not a doubt of it!" And he slapped Nugent heartily on the shoulder, but Nugent kept rather silent all the rest of the afternoon.

CHAPTER XXIII. AND LAST.

STRANGE TRIUMPH OF THE DOCTOR.

THE contest was only beginning. To balance the previous loss of Mr. Pitt to one political interest, there had flowed to the other, at no long interval, Mr. Fox's death: party rivalries ran none the less fierce and keen that smaller men were guiding them, or that they were embittered by jealousies and dispeace in high places. Again did truce in the great world, like a lull in the storm, give way before the strife for empire, and war threatened to thunder up again, that the long struggle

might reach its climax, to be terribly closed and decided. The expected dissolution of Parliament came upon the country like a signal to arms, and the new writ for Chelmsstone was looked for every day ; amidst a local eagerness round the little place, which drew force from its ambiguous tendency to personalities, making it doubly important to either side, while every grocer, draper, or petty tavern-keeper, felt himself a Hercules for whom two goddesses contended, rather than the quadruped of the logicians between the equal sheaves of fodder. The busy canvass on both parts left them little leisure by day or night, but the weight of Mayor Singleton was already telling in the balance, backed by the exertions of Doctor Smith, with the boasted independence which their new and youthful candidate could so well corroborate by his own expressions. Legal agents were emulous in hints of benefit, and the chances of bribery and corruption might have been called about equal ; but direct influence tended to the allied side, and prospects of open taps and casks of ale were immensely in favour of the brewery.

It was on one of those earlier days of his activity that a rather unexpected incident befell Doctor Smith ; one a little disconcerting to him at the time, as well as by no means unimportant to the issue. It had already somewhat annoyed him that Mr. Price showed a degree of forwardness in Nugent's cause, which was not to his taste, however friendly on that worthy lawyer's part ; seeing that his diligence had not relaxed for the Buffs at Notley, where Whig principles were now held to be so secure as to preclude opposition on the occasion. The old gentleman had positively discouraged any such professional assistance from him that very morning, when the attorney had called on his way for other business at Chelmsstone ; delaying to visit the town so early as he would have done, himself, in order that a chance meeting there might be avoided. Mr. Price had readily acceded to the desire, and disowned the least wish to interfere ; he was the last man to be officious, he might express an

opinion by the way, but "to take anything further upon him—certainly not!—they understood each other, their views were too similar to need both to push them, or to justify the slightest thwarting." Still, the lawyer's parting nod had something in it so satisfied, if not confidential, that as Doctor Smith walked up Chipping Lane with his nephew, he made a point of inquiring—ere the latter parted from him towards Hinchbrook to see the Squire, —whether he understood exactly the nature of Whig views and measures. Nugent had been paying particular attention to them within the last day or two, he stated: yes, variable and accommodating as they were on the whole, he did think he had formed a pretty accurate general conception of their spirit, their recent character also. Did he feel inclined to them? Certainly not; the young man repudiated the idea rather scornfully.

"Very good—very good," was the response, accompanied by a decided buttoning of the coat and striking of the gold-headed cane into the ground: "that's satisfactory—I'm your man. Be sure to let the Squire know it."

"Mr. Ashburton understands it, I think, sir," said Nugent.

"Hang it, then—he should join us:" returned his uncle with animation: "I'll see him this very evening and ask his name, at least, for the committee we're forming. You'll be there, perhaps?"

"Well—as *you* think so, sir," was the slow answer—"perhaps I may remain if—if invited."

"Invitations be—hum—never mind 'em, my dear boy!" said the impetuous uncle. "It's business—business, you know. Nothing like promptitude—nothing like boldness—you can discuss the Tories or—or talk to the ladies. Why,—what—you're not getting disheartened already, man? We're getting on splendidly—Singleton goes with us, heart and hand—a regular trump after all!"

"Mr. Singleton is to be there to-night," remarked the

young man, gloomily. "He seems there every evening just now. There is something—evidently something going to be, before long. Things have been brought to a crisis, no doubt, since I—since our recent visits, I mean."

"So much the better," was the answer, as the Doctor rubbed his hands. "The Mayor and I will fix him this very evening. Get him into the drawing-room and keep him till I come."

"I have not been there yet," said Nugent, biting his lip. "It is young Mr. Singleton I mean. He has got a commission in the army, I believe, and goes abroad at once—unless, of course—unless ——"

"What the deuce is the matter?" inquired the old bachelor, coming back to see why he turned his face away. "Oh, I recollect! There was some fancy of yours in that quarter—you were smitten, eh—you precious young dog? The second daughter—a fine girl, too—remarkably fine. I've talked to her—tried to bring her out about you for a while. She didn't seem to take it—rather shirked it, I remember, till I almost forgot the thing. I don't wonder at you, though, Nugent. Not got rid of it yet?"

Nugent's effort at resolution could not disguise the fact. His voice was husky and shaken as he informed his uncle, in reply to further hasty inquiries, that he feared all was virtually settled. Miss Margaret Ashburton, he thought, did not altogether turn a cold ear to the young officer's addresses, which had lately seemed to redouble their warmth; after a temporary absence on his part in Town, but still more since Nugent's own return. Both the families, too, appeared to count on it as a thing understood; and the summons of the lieutenant's new regiment to active service, on which he had significantly reserved his decision, must doubtless have determined him to settle all. That very evening, perhaps: it was yet Nugent who could not help catching at any opportunity to hang near, and flutter like a moth toward

the flame. His uncle saw it ; he said, " Bless me, boy—you're over head and ears—your heart's *in* the thing ! You must try—hang it, sir, you must try ! At once, too ! Get the start of him and ask *first*, I say—just compare the two of you—a red coat and a sword would make you fifty per cent. a handsomer-looking fellow. You shall have fair play, by gum ! I'm a Dutchman if you shan't have her ! A faint heart, I tell you, boy—but pluck up courage and win ! "

Nugent shook his head. No : he could endure it, no doubt—a career was before him, he expected, which would help him to forget it. But to go back and ask—Besides, even could he succeed—the Singletons would be at once turned from friendliness into the bitterest enemies—the election would be lost for certain.

His uncle started at the thought, eyeing him in no small discomfort, joined to perplexity. " Still, if he don't make the offer for a day or two yet ? " he suggested, with anxious concern at Nugent's air. " We might be safe enough by that time, I hope. Well—well—we'll see this evening. Don't lose hold of the Squire, for any sake—let him understand you, Nugent—secure him." And Doctor Smith turned to hurry up the lane for Chelmstone.

He was entering its precincts by a narrow bypath past the Hall property, when three persons from the town so fairly met him in the face, as to require mutual civilities in the passage ; while the sight of two of them produced some sense of awkwardness, with a touch of annoyance at the encounter. These were no others than Bailiff Sloane and the agent for Lord Chively, indicating by their presence that the tall gentleman in advance, with hair almost grey enough to have required no powder, who so politely yielded more than half the breadth of the path, must be a very principal party on the hostile side. Sloane even touched his hat, to own Doctor Smith's share of the accommodating disposition, and next moment observed something in a low tone to the superior of the three, who turned abruptly round ; till, at the slight backward glance

of Dr. Smith, he made a courteous bend of his erect figure, raising his hat a little and coming towards him with the other hand extended, in a way which at first startled the old gentleman, perhaps the more that he then recognized a distinct resemblance to Sir Thomas Deane. The Colonel's face was a much calmer one, however ; and he smiled with marked cordiality in his very gracious manner. " You are Doctor Smith—pardon me," he said, grasping the uncertain hand and emphatically shaking it, " but being told so, I could not pass, sir. No. I am aware of all those circumstances, Doctor Smith, which I need only allude to, in marking my appreciation. Sir, I know also that we are opposed to each other at the commencement of a contest which might perhaps have rendered this feeling less easy to state—but it would not otherwise have been so impressed on us—on my brother, Sir Thomas Deane, and myself, sir, at all so forcibly—how delicate your conduct has been. Not a breath—not a breath as to that occurrence—has reached in a direction where it might have been felt as—as annoying as it formerly was—was painful."

Doctor Smith made a response ; half confusedly mumbled, half muttered in deprecation of the idea.

" Yes, sir—yes, Doctor Smith," persisted the Colonel, " on the part of Sir Thomas, who does not the less appreciate it that he has not had the pleasure of such an opportunity—but also for myself, I must thank you. The first excitement of a political contest has not been able to avail itself of anything mean or generous from that source—the source I have alluded to!—Your nephew, Mr. Smythe, I understand, intends coming forward for the borough. Sir, your support of him is the most natural thing in the world. On the opposition side, I presume, sir—for I have not yet happened to learn what may be Mr. Smythe's politics ? "

" No, Colonel Deane—certainly not, sir," replied the old gentleman decidedly. " My nephew is not a Whig : far from it—no more than myself, perhaps less. He's

not a Tory, though—his views are independent—independent, sir, to the backbone. He will only vote when he approves the measure—neither he nor I would go with a party—we'd propose measures of our own."

The Colonel looked grave, but not inimical to the idea. It evidently struck him; and unwilling to detain Doctor Smith, he accompanied him back a little towards the town, reasoning about it. As they gently went forward, quite absorbed in discussion, they both looked up and found themselves, with mutual uneasiness, far on in the first street. "It might almost be thought, Doctor Smith," remarked Colonel Deane, smiling, "that I meant to support your candidate myself. Although Lord Chively has retired, and I do not intend again directly burdening myself longer with public matters—still it would not do." Doctor Smith had stared at the news regarding Lord Chively, but the Colonel went on. "No. Unless this independence of Mr. Smythe's sentiments, indeed, were certain? If you could yourself be responsible for the fact."

"That I'll pledge myself for!" exclaimed the Doctor, somewhat eagerly. "I've had him under my eye for the last five years—he's grown up, I may say, under it—I've trained him, sir, and moulded him."

"In that case—in that case," was the serious reply, "it might be thought of—it *might*—might very possibly be done. Especially if Mr. Ashburton agreed. We really must consider Mr. Ashburton, you know!"

"I think he will—I feel convinced of it, Colonel Deane!" said Doctor Smith.

"The truth is," pursued the former, "at every cost the Whigs must be kept out. We knew well enough who our real enemy was, let me tell you—where the spiteful *animus* lies. The behaviour of Mayor Singleton is flagrant. He is ready to *rat*, sir!—to do anything—to bring in Whig or Jacobin, even—in order that a vulgar low-bred grudge may be gratified. Are you aware of the move intended by the opposition here,

Dr. Smith—the trick against us both, into which this unprincipled brewer would at once go, if offended by you in any point?”

“A trick? No, Colonel Deane—no,” returned his less-practised companion, anxiously interrogative.

“They are paving the way, it seems,” said the Colonel promptly, “to slip in their former nominee, an honourable namesake of your own, who was signally defeated here last election—to slip him in, probably, upon the very ground you yourselves have gained, sir! A Mr. Price is the agent, from Notley.”

“Price! Price!” repeated his companion in amazement. “Impossible! Why, yonder he is—the very man—dropping out of the post-office door. I’ll know the truth at once—it’s shameful, sir!”

“Most disgraceful, my dear sir,” was the more composed rejoinder. “If so, it must be met. Good-day—let us meet and understand our position. I shall be most happy to communicate—or to call on you personally. At the Hall, I shall be at your service at any hour you please.”

Doctor Smith shook hands with him in a far more friendly manner than he now displayed to the greeting of Mr. Price.

“The Colonel is quite mistaken, my dear sir, I assure you,” said the little man, hastening to clear himself, “if he connects me with the proposal. I was aware of it, no doubt—but I vastly prefer your nephew. I know your sentiments, Dr. Smith—we’re quite at one—only you are more liberal and independent still than I am. Professional matters entangle us, my good sir—more than we’re aware. But a really independent member is what I want—exactly what suits my private views. Besides, an independent member is sure—sure on the whole, you know—to go along with us. His vote may be counted on. He’s a Reformer and a Liberal, sir, for certain—or else—or else he’s *not* independent.”

His client eyed him impatiently as he was getting into his gig: he distinctly repeated Nugent’s own words.

"That alters the case," said Mr. Price, taking a pinch of snuff. "If he means to oppose constitutional reform so decidedly as that comes to, I give him up.—And now we understand each other, I really must warn you that I would, if necessary, transfer my aid—or give any professional assistance—to his honourable namesake. The truth is, my dear Smith, your nephew is neither more nor less than a—a budding Tory!"

The Doctor's good-bye was somewhat of a ruffled one, as the Notley lawyer drove off, leaving him to traverse Chelmsstone more rapidly than he had meant, and soon direct his course homewards by the circuit of Hinchbrook.

He found the Squire sitting with an easy conversational air of leisure, at the oriel-window of his library, beside Nugent, who was talking, too, in apparent harmony with his host, although his looks were by no means so composed to the eye of his uncle. He glanced out of window uneasily, as the latest brightness of the afternoon began to wane; he seemed listening within for something, as if the opening of the room-door had conveyed sounds to an ear quickened by anxiety; and was evidently relieved at its being some one else who came in. "Sit down, Doctor Smith," said the Squire cheerfully, and looked at his watch; "we shall have to directly, I daresay—but, bless me! 'Tis late—we should have been summoned an hour ago—they must be waiting for some one else. Our fine young officer, no doubt—Mr. Singleton. Well—Nugent and I have had a long talk together—I really think we understand each other. I do think I could conscientiously—consistently—agree to give him my aid and support, such as they are."

"You don't say so!" broke out Doctor Smith joyfully "I'm delighted to hear it, Mr. Ashburton—delighted, sir, to hear it."

"The truth is," said the Squire, partaking complacently of the satisfaction, "I think so highly of our young friend here, that it gives me real pleasure to find—not that

I altogether expected it, I own—how nearly we agree on the whole. Considering all things, with due allowance for youth and partial experience, not to speak of an ardour which every young man ought to have—I declare I should vastly prefer him to Lord Chiveley, with his official connections, or Colonel Deahe, a thorough follower of the old school. Why, I have found that he regards a limited monarchy as the best of all governments, and loyalty as one of our noblest sentiments,—an aristocracy as not only essential, but most beneficial,—an Established Protestant Church he considers to be rightfully upheld and acknowledged by the State—he is of opinion that rank and property should be well represented, but also every one of the various classes and leading interests in the country. As for the idea of founding our representation on mere numbers and sizes, or our legislation and government on majorities simply as such—a modern notion, by the way, of the vulgarest kind, of which experience shows the absurdity—Nugent utterly scouts it, along with all the latitudinarianism of ultra-toleration, the system of expediency, and the assumption that any man's crotchet is the national will or benefit. On some points he even goes beyond me, as in wishing substantial minorities and learned bodies to have their proportion of Parliamentary membership—but we coincide in thinking the present war a just one, and the balance of power to deserve our continued efforts for its maintenance. He and I really get on excellently together—I had no conception that Nugent had thought so much on political matters, or could reason on them so forcibly, sometimes so eloquently, I might say, except once or twice, when it struck me he allowed himself to get out of his depth and talk a little—yes—wildly, perhaps.”

To this commendatory account of his nephew's views, Doctor Smith had listened in a surprise that reached absolute consternation. “What—what—Nugent, you mean?” stammered he, fixing his widened eyes on the

young man, who had given rather a listless attention to the statement. "Does he say so! Do you actually hold such notions—such monstrosities! Eh, eh, boy?"

"So far as I can judge at present, sir," responded Nugent, still half-abstracted, "such are—I believe Mr. Ashburton has very nearly expressed the opinions which—which I am not exactly aware whether you yourself entertain—that is to say, would approve of?"

"Approve of!" exclaimed the uncle, staring. "Confound it—I'd rather go and hang myself—I consider them atrocious! They're *principles*, no doubt—which is what Whig's don't have, nor pretend to—but Pitt himself, or Edmund Burke, could scarcely have gone further! Why, they're rank Tory!"

"Come, come, my dear sir," said the Squire soothingly, "let us avoid calling names. Our categorical habit does a world of mischief; why not judge by the merits, and say they're intelligent, at all events, and sincere! Surely they're an enlightened obstructivism, if they do obstruct at all? I have no hesitation in saying we could not do better than join to carry Nugent's election, for I feel convinced that he will yet do credit to all concerned."

Dr. Smith shook his head inexorably, saying it was out of the question; Nugent could go on, of course; but for himself to support and vote for him would be preposterous—ridiculous—unprincipled in the extreme—he couldn't do it—no—but let him succeed, good and well: perhaps, privately speaking, he (the Doctor) couldn't help wishing it might be.

"Bless me, Dr. Smith," remarked Mr. Ashburton, with a slightly-annoyed air, "you spoke of independence—you wanted a free, independent member who would vote as he really thought. It seems to me you meant—vote as *you* did, too. You should have stood yourself, sir!"

The energetic old gentleman manifestly winced and looked down. "Well—well—there's some truth in

that," said he, with an effort. "I admit I ought to have seen beforehand that—that—I was wrong. I took it too much for granted. As for me—why," and he began to laugh a little, "I suspect Tom Hubbard and Dick Cox, with perhaps Muggops and Murphy, would have been my whole train. In Chelmsstone I could have counted on a voter, I dare say, in the foreman of the dyery, though he's a Radical—because—because, you see, the situation is a good one, and I could have given him—three months' warning." He leant back as he caught the humour in the Squire's eye, and they both laughed in unison. "I fancy we're all apt to be tarred with the same stick, when we touch politics!" added he.

"My dear uncle," said his nephew, turning to him abruptly, "in these circumstances I cannot think of continuing the attempt—I shall certainly not stand in opposition to your convictions. I now beg—and you must consider it my final decision—to withdraw."

Doctor Smith gave him an anxious glance, drawing a long breath, as if relieved. "It would be rather unfair, no doubt—don't you think, Mr. Ashburton," he said, in a hesitating manner, "to cut out the Deanes for no object? Have you any objection, sir, to the Colonel? He seems a reasonable sort of man, and particularly inclined to be friendly."

"Oh, certainly," was the prompt answer. "I could have no remaining reason to withhold support from him. Nothing personal, believe me, shall ever induce me to mix up principle and private feeling." They both eyed Nugent, whose thoughts appeared the more singularly abstracted, as with a face absolutely colourless he gave the most intense notice by eye and ear: whether his host's undisturbed figure, or the lawn outside, or sounds in the adjacent hall, were by turns most required to make up his mind. In the mutual pause, they could all hear the sudden raising of some one's voice from an opened room within, a sudden violent slamming of its

door, a transient confused bustle in the lobby, an outer bell rung in haste, and emphatic steps hurrying out to the front; to which succeeded the tramp of a horse on the gravel, and finally its hoofs clattering away to the avenue. Nugent started to his feet and looked eagerly after.

"Is that anyone come?" asked the Squire, sitting up. "I really wish we had a dish of tea to moisten our throats."

"The—Sir Thomas Deane, you say, sir?" was the oddly irrelevant response; followed, however, by more distinct application to the subject discussed. "Yes—yes, I think the Deanes should be considered, uncle. There has been some amount of misunderstanding, I believe, between you—after which a little concession just now might come well on your side. Especially as I have determined to give up my own part in the opposition."

"And you'll keep up heart, then?" eagerly rejoined his uncle. "You'll turn to something else, my dear boy—for the present, at least? Hang it, there's agriculture—there's local matters, worth a seat ten times over, in the present corrupt House, with its place-hunting party-spirit—it's—it's—never mind just now—we'll have plenty of opportunities to argue! What you say about old Sir Thomas struck me before—I'll see the Colonel personally, with the consent you've offered—this very night, too—before I sleep!"

"Still, old Singleton ought to be informed, I think," mildly remarked Mr. Ashburton. "Of course, of course—I don't want to offend him," returned Doctor Smith, "I'll take him on the way."

At the sound of the tea-bell, they joined the family-circle in the withdrawing-room, where Nugent for the first time met them again in the old social way, somewhat covered by the presence of one or two evening visitors. Mrs. Ashburton, amidst her pleasure at the circumstance, did seem to others that evening less

collected and at ease than usual ; Nugent himself could have told that there was a degree of annoyance in her manner, with an occasional contraction on the still fair forehead, which she could not altogether smoothe away ; much as she inclined to compliment him on his travels, his growth and change, his decided chance of success at the poll for Chelmsstone, his certainty so far as the softer sex were concerned, and his maiden speech in Parliament. He had noticed the absence, during the earlier portion of the night, of a certain member of the family ; who, it was casually mentioned, had a severe headache. Later, indeed, Margaret Ashburton did slip in, scarce observed, and joined the rest about the busy harpsichord, with a face somewhat pale and a very decided air about the mouth, as if resolute not to sing : but he did not venture to inquire after the headache, and she seemed to avoid conversation ; and there was an inquiring manner in the Squire's survey of things, which suggested that early freedom from guests might not be undesirable. So he did not stay behind his impatient uncle, who hurried off through summer moonlight by Chelmsstone to the Hall.

Doctor Smith was surprised by the Mayor's chilled enthusiasm regarding Nugent's success since that very afternoon ; still more at the readiness he displayed to give him up, without any displeasure or ill-temper towards the Doctor himself personally, whatever he might allow he thought of the young man's flighty conduct, indeed his qualities in general. Above all was the old gentleman disposed, while resolving to take no affront at this tone, to open his eyes at a certain indignant mention of the Squire in which the old brewer checked himself—only adding that he would henceforth go in with nothing which was upheld by either the Hall or Manor House, both Squire and baronet being on more to be depended upon than they had ever been, to his taste. He would now have no hesitation in supporting a most eligible man, an honourable namesake of the

Doctor's own, and a very highly-connected individual, who he had thought had on a former occasion received injustice from the constituency: but the coincidence of *names* was quite convenient, and he would be the more confident in trusting that the Doctor himself would continue his support.

At the Hall, Doctor Smith was at once ushered to the library, where he was cordially received by Colonel Deane, although engaged with his agent and some gentlemen from London. It was not without an appearance of some disappointment and disconcertion, however cordially, that the unexpected announcement was taken from Doctor Smith. The Colonel had almost begun to count upon Mr. Smythe, and to consider how their plans could be suited to him, as a most promising young candidate of independent principles, holding property in the immediate neighbourhood, with influential connections in the borough; for whom all interests but those of the most violent Whigs or vulgar levellers, seemed likely to unite. Still, the Colonel's part was to submit. He felt disposed to regret it. The Whigs, at every cost, must be excluded: he had no other course left him but once more to take up the harness, burdensome as it had become of late, and—to come forward again himself.

As Doctor Smith made an acquiescent attempt at a bow, and rose, taking his hat to depart, the Colonel hastily left the room through a side-door, and very soon returned, followed by the heavier steps of the baronet himself. Old Sir Thomas flushed up a little at sight of the Doctor's awkward look; but he came straight forward to him, blurring out something in his old puffy, muffled, hoarse way, about pleasure to see him under his roof—about thanks, a misunderstanding, and hope to avoid it for the future—to meet, in fact, and know each other better. In the stout old bachelor's shake of the hand there was no small emphasis; his voice was a little husky, and it was not without emotion that he bluntly

owned to a hot temper and a great many mistakes in life, but hoped the same as the baronet. As for the present offer, he disowned all credit for it: the retirement was on his nephew's part; he could not support the Colonel; he would keep neutral and say nothing more on the subject—that was all. They would have this Whig man to oppose: but he didn't see what chance *he* had.

They parted in a wonderfully friendly way, considering all; and the Colonel saw the visitor down to the foot of the staircase.

Thus the persevering Deanes once more carried the day; for although the Honourable Mr. Smythe came to the hustings and had the show of hands, he was brought to a poll which terminated in his decided overthrow.

Doctor Smith might have been thought to lose the triumph, too; but in his own mind it was much more satisfactory to have overcome some prejudices, also some amount of pride in his self-raised fortune, position, and enterprising notions. Besides, having so gained Sir Thomas, he had Chelmstone and Hinchbridge pretty well open to his projects in a quiet way. In a year or two, the village would have been hard to recognize by one slightly acquainted with it. The Grange, too, was greatly altered: on Poplar Farm there had been built a new "*cottage ornée*," rose-covered and snug in garden shrubbery, where Mrs. Smythe lived with the Doctor and her younger daughter. When Nugent married the second Miss Ashburton, and was induced to give up active partnership in the London mercantile firm, with a view to rural improvements, further purchase of adjoining property, attention to country matters and their social bearings, perhaps to political influence. As to the marriage itself, is it not recorded in the local paper of the day, to which he had contributed both by money and by writings?—also in the very "*Court Journal*," casually, at the usual rate per line,—in the "*Gentleman's Magazine*" of the next month, on the Squire's account as a

subscriber for many years,—and above all, most disinterestedly on the young proprietor's own account, as a promising politician of brilliant parts and shining capacity, in the new "Town and Country Magazine" of the period, to which the interested reader may refer.

It was more surprising when the Curate, "perpetual curate" still, but made more comfortable in a worldly point of view by the death of Mrs. Deputy Webb at the age of seventy, with all her faculties preserved—consoled himself by an abrupt proposition to Miss Smythe, one day as they fell behind in serious conversation. She was scarce half his age at furthest; but even "Young Evans," who went resolutely into his particular dragoon regiment, made no offer, and had married another: so Jane, who really respected the Curate, and liked management better than the old lady had fancied, required a week to consider, but before it was out, wrote a letter of kind acceptance. She governed him completely in the household department, but did not meddle with the spiritual: therefore she made him a good wife and a most astonished parent.

Also, when Miss Muggops of the "Blue Pig," receiving no letters from the sergeant in the Peninsula, smiled the more openly on Frank Murphy from Poplar Cottage; until the wedding was celebrated with the utmost pomp of Hinchbridge, in bells, favours, and jovial rejoicing. Upon which old Joe himself, having long spoken of retiring from *public* life, to enjoy his latter years privately, in pastoral peace next door, where there was a smoking-arbour among cabbage-ground, with a sty for a pig of natural hue—took the cottage cheap, after the death of Goody Brown, but seemed woefully discontented. The old parish-clerk, old Dockett, had at last yielded to his cough, and retreated further away still, for ever on earth. The place was changed. Over the adjoining pales, a child of Emma's and Murphy's, who had taken the inn of the "Blue Boar," began to be able to peep at him sitting. It was that which forced

him to a convulsive effort, which ended in his settling down with homely Sarah Flake, who had "had her disappointments," but was agreeably disappointed before long, as Sarah of old was disappointed, after the angels came to her tent door. It made her a new woman. It wonderfully improved and revived Muggops.

After the peace, after Waterloo, at last there came to Chelmsstone a sergeant-major, Emma Muggops's former sweetheart. He looked all whole, and had a pension; yet it was suspected he had a cork-leg. Sometimes he was the soul of the "Blue Boar" for stories, however; and he delighted the cobbler, Tom Hubbard, who joked with him, and made for him many *pairs* of shoes.

THE END.

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